

Women in Non-Western Civilization: The Workbook

By Wendy Adele-Marie, Ph.D.

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## Acknowledgments

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### **Complexity of the Narrative**

We must recognize the complexity of the Middle Eastern context, which plays a foundational role in Western civilization, yet is often excluded from Western-centric narratives. Although the Middle East is generally not represented in this volume, it is essential to provide this brief note to explain the rationale behind our boundaries for defining women and non-Western civilizations. We plan to expand on women in the Middle East in the second edition of Women in Western Civilization OER more comprehensively. The inclusion of Sarah Gwo's paper was intentional, as her study exemplifies the universal issues many women face, both in construct and context.

## Unit One

### Introduction, Prehistory, and Ancient Civilizations

Start by learning about three ancient rulers (click their names to go to the source):

1. [Queen Amanirenas of Kush](#)
2. [Empress Wu Zetian](#)
3. [Queen Prabhavatigupta](#)

### Introduction

As we explore women's history in non-Western civilizations, we will use primary sources, as available, to help these women's voices and stories emerge. Other times, we will use secondary sources, or various general histories of different eras, events, and countries.

Because of the lack of cohesive documentation of women's histories throughout the centuries, and while we have works such as *Women Philosophers from Non-western Traditions: The First Four Thousand Years* by Mary Ellen Waithe and Therese Boos Dyken, we will attempt to shape a story of women in Western Civilization by using a variety of resources, from music, poetry, art, and more.

Specific free sources accompanying my narrative and those of our contributors were curated for you to view or read (the contributor essays are at the end of this workbook).

Here are two general guides (with links included), the first is vast and general, and can be used for reference only, whereas the second is more academic. Then, a database of women in science, from ancient times to present, with the fourth link from the UN, a clickable timeline of the history of women's rights that you can also consult as you move through the course.

- **Use as a guide:** [Fordham: Women in Ancient History](#) (website, encyclopedic, with many resources)
- **Women and Science** is a critical subject to review. Click on this site, [Scientific Women: Antiquity to Present Day](#), and there you will find a list of women you can read about by period in time. As you progress through the course, go back to this site to track what women in science were doing during the period that you are studying.
- **Use as a guide:** [Women of the world, unite! Explore women's activism from generations past and present.](#)
- **Optional free PDF book:** [Women Philosophers from Non-Western Traditions: The First Four Thousand Years](#)
- Use this link and code STUDENT25 to purchase a 180-day access to the e-book. Note that this book is a general history of gender, covers all areas of the world, has graphic content related to femicide, genocide, enslavement, SA, and more, so please be aware before purchasing access. I include references to some of the scholarships in our OER workbook.

## Prehistory

Agencies of power and roles probably differed from community to community, but the evidence suggested that women held power and had flexibility of roles, were essential to governance, and critical to trade, familial support, and community survival. Women in Non-Western Civilizations is a critical topic to study and observe, as these individuals preceded women in Western Civilizations. Who were these women? What were their stories? What evidence do we have of their work, lives, communities, and more? We will begin with prehistoric women and progress through the modern age.

## Prehistoric women

In 2013, National Geographic published a study that supports the idea that women created 75% of prehistoric cave art; archaeologist Dean Snow analyzed human hand prints and determined that the artwork was done by women (Hughes 2013). For more, see: [Were the first artists mainly women?](#)

An interesting excerpt from page nine of Rosi Braidotti and Gabriele Griffin's, *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies*, argued that in ancient times, women have been portrayed as having supernatural-like powers while equating power with femininity, and that this construct of femininity has led to erroneous and even an erasure of women's history:

Europe takes its name from a woman, Europa, the daughter of the legendary king of Tyre, who was beloved by Zeus, 'the father of gods and men' as Homer would have it. Europa was carried away by Zeus in the form of a bull to Crete, where she bore him three sons. This link to Greece, the country that is also credited with being 'the cradle of European civilization,' associates Europe with seductive femininity and a specific locale. (Braidotti and Griffin 2002, p.9)

So while we have that western-centric depiction, what do scholars say about how women were viewed in ancient times, and what legends have emerged? Scholar Lauren Talalay, in her essay "The Mother Goddess in Prehistory: Debates and Perspectives," discussed two distinct views of women's agency in the ancient world and explained the variant theories here:

For over a century, archaeologists, mythographers, poets, psychoanalysts, and many others have debated the existence and meaning of a so-called Mother Goddess in prehistory. Often contentious, the debate has fallen into two basic camps. On one side are "Goddess movement" proponents who claim that early Mediterranean, Egyptian, and Near Eastern societies worshiped an all-powerful female deity, celebrated nature, and embraced an egalitarian ideal within a matriarchal social structure. Supporting evidence for the worship of the Goddess, it is argued, derives from two sources: the myriad female figurines recovered from archaeological contexts dating from approximately 40,000 years ago to 3500 BCE, and the existence of later Mother Goddess types (e.g., Ishtar, Astarte, Cybele, and the Roman Magna Mater), all of which are thought to represent vestiges of these earlier female divinities. In the opposing camp stand academic archaeologists who discount these "meta-narratives" as an invented past. They argue that such ideas find little support in the archaeological record, cast religion as static despite momentous social changes over the

millennia, and are politically driven, most recently by the feminist movement. The academic side is also quick to observe that, even if evidence for a primal Mother Goddess were unassailable, arguments linking the theological realm to the social structures of these early communities are weak. Worship of a nurturing Mother Goddess who oversees cosmological creation, fertility, and death does not necessarily entail or reflect a pacifist matriarchy and female power in society. The debate is complex and sprawling, encompassing issues that extend beyond the topics of religion, prehistoric theology, and the precise roles of such a goddess in prehistory (James and Dillon 2012, p. 7).

How can we construct women's lives, histories, and more without more than a few documented diaries or primary accounts of women who did not hold power and led everyday lives of differing statuses, as humankind evolved? History, archaeology, geography, anthropology, art, and science can be examined.

As an example, new evidence often emerges from the records, and of late, scientists have discovered that prehistoric women collected, hunted, harvested, and developed/honed tools with strength, endurance, and overall athleticism that was greater than that of athletes. See this article for more on how [Prehistoric women's manual labor exceeded that of athletes.](#)

The article focuses on Central European women, but what about Central Europe's ancestors? Wang et al. (Wang et al. 2023) notes that all European descendants came from the continent of Africa and captured the trajectory of human lives for 250,000 years, noting that they developed "a method for predicting historical male and female generation times based on changes in the mutation spectrum. Our analyses of whole-genome data reveal an average generation time of 26.9 years across the past 250,000 years, with fathers consistently older (30.7 years) than mothers (23.2 years)." (Wang et al. 2023) I recommend reading the article "[Human generation times across the past 250,000 years](#)" from the peer-reviewed journal *Science Advances* for more on how women's lifespans evolved and rose, but the shifts in female life expectancies depended on, and still does depend on where the woman lives, and other factors;

see this 2023 global study from *Our World in Data* a UK-based agency: [Women live longer than men, but how much longer varies widely around the world](#)

Published in *Science Advances*, Prendergast et al., in their article, “[Ancient DNA reveals a multistep spread of the first herders into sub-Saharan Africa](#),” noted that “some lineages may be reflected in a man and a woman buried at Prettejohn’s Gully ~4000 B.P.” (Prendergast et al. 2019). B.P. stands for before the present, meaning present day. Over 4,000 years ago, and possibly a thousand years earlier, a man and a woman lived in the Turkana Basin, East Africa region, which borders southeastern Sudan and eastern Uganda. In this discussion, a basin can be defined as a body of water characterized by its inability to discharge into an ocean or sea. The scientists noted that these two people did not leave behind much evidence of all except for their remains, and out of their remains DNA was extracted, which then revealed that this pair passed away together, or close to the time one another passed, and that they descended from herders whose DNA had been found in other areas of the African continent.

Depending on what objects were found in the excavations of these ancient peoples, the scientists could make some assumptions, including that material objects could suggest societal separation based on cultural accumulation of items, as well as whether they were herders, foragers, or even farmers, noting that from this research, they found that “he earliest documentation of western African-related ancestry in eastern Africa, in a region where today such ancestry is widespread and the majority of people speak Bantu languages” showing direct descendants (Prendergast et al. 2019).

Using objects was a way to determine status. Owen Jarus, in a 2025 article for *Live Science*, explained that women in ancient Nubia, a region now encompassing northern Sudan and southern Egypt, encompassing many principalities and communities with different leaders and

community practices, used tumplines. Tumplines were head straps that connected baskets and sacks, meaning the women carried loads using their heads. Jarus explained further that Jared Carballo-Pérez, a bioarcheologist at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, related that this discovery was proven based on exhumation of skeletal remains, some dating back as far as 4,000 years ago. Dr. Carballo-Pérez and his team related that the women's remains bore signs of degeneration, meaning that the loads they were carrying caused pain and harm to their skeletal systems; male skeletons did not bear the same markings and signs of degeneration. What were the women carrying? We can assume children, but perhaps water, animals, food, etc. The tumplines are still used, as Jarus noted: "People in modern times still use tumplines. The practice is still alive today in rural regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America" (Jarus 2025). Based on the examination of the skeletal remains, can we conclude that the women who used tumplines did the majority of heavy labor, or at the very least, most of the heavy lifting, since their remains differed so much more than those of the men?

From this analysis, we can see that we can use archaeology, geography, anthropology, art, and science to help us pull together stories of women's lives in non-western societies, and by using the workbook and resources, you can then also learn how to construct images of women from the past – and present – that have been mainly omitted from histories.

Other facts about Prehistoric women and men include the following points:

- The oldest hominin ancestors possibly lived 7 million years ago
  - **Watch the lecture:** [One cave—three hominin lineages. Australopithecus and Paranthropus meet Homo in Drimolen with Dr. Sang-Hee Lee.](#)
- Lucy, a female skeleton, was found and is believed to be over 3,000,000 years old.
  - **Watch:** [Lucy the 3.2 Million Year Old Mother of Man | BBC Earth](#)

- Paleolithic and Nomadic Women
  - **Watch lecture:** [Human Evolution with Dr. Sang-Hee Lee](#)
- Origins of Matriarchy: patriarchal lineage and matriarchal societies
  - When did the matriarchy begin in non-Western societies? [Lewis Henry Morgan](#) and others such as Sir Henry Maine and Johann Jakob Bachhofen made a case that humans evolved into matriarchal societies before they became patriarchal and that this was due to the worship of female goddesses and deities, and the emphasis on fertility and maternalism for the society to survive; [Bettany Hughes](#) has argued that the idea of women revered for their power, status, and community leadership and survival was destroyed by western actors – who did so both in the non-western and western worlds – as women represented a threat to masculinity and patriarchy.
  - What were the two main types of matriarchal agency? Matriarchal lineage and matriarchal societies.
  - Distinctions between the two types of matriarchal agency can be made by examining what societies and systems were and how they differed. (Socio Health 2024)
  - Definition: Matriarchal lineage falls under the matrilineal order of familial descent, whose lineage is traced through the mother's family or ancestry. For more, see the essay from Sara Lowes on [Kinship Structure and the Family: Evidence from the Matrilineal Belt](#)
  - Definition: Matriarchal societies are social systems in which women, especially mothers, assume substantial positions of agency, power, and authority. For more

on the subject, see this paper by Heide Göttner-Abendroth: [Matriarchal Society: Definition and Theory](#)

Today, there are six areas in the world where matriarchal societies have existed for centuries, including, but not limited to, these six specific locations:

- Akan, Ghana
- Bribri, Costa Rica
- Khasi, India
- Minangkabau, Indonesia
- Mosuo, China
- Umoja, Kenya

Learn more about these six matriarchal societies by reviewing this site: [Six Matriarchal Societies](#)

- Matriarchal systems have been redefined by scholars like Göttner-Abendroth, who argued that previous definitions of matriarchal systems have focused on women's governance, or a women-rule only; instead, she stated that "Matriarchies (such as seen in Khasi, India) will be shown to be gender-egalitarian and consensus-based societies" (Göttner-Abendroth 2018, p. 1)

In some prehistoric and ancient systems, women practiced animism (worship of nature spirits) and deities; the following sources provide more context:

- **Watch:** [Divine Women: When God was a Girl](#) (video description: "Historian Bettany Hughes goes back to the beginning of time and visits the world's oldest religious site to find startling evidence that women were part of the very birth of organised religion. She visits a world where goddesses ruled the heavens and earth and reveals why our ancestors thought of the divine as female.")
- Neolithic period
  - **Read** pages 22-26 from the peer-reviewed article, [Ancient Goddesses for more on this topic.](#)

## Ancient Civilizations

### Introduction

Now, let us look at women in some ancient societies, review the roles that women held, and how agencies of power differed.

Ancient women's roles were diverse, and their lives are essential for us to begin to understand how these women lived, worked, led, and more. Let's now revisit the practice of tumplines, which was – and still is - found in areas including Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Carballo-Pérez et al. 2024, noted that women in the Bronze Age (3300 BCE-1200 BCE) in Congo, Egypt, Nubia, and Sudan, that there were “gendered patterns behind load-carrying practices” meaning that women had greater overall distinct and deteriorating changes in their skeletal structures than did men, noting that “results on vertebral pathological conditions and unintentional cranial modifications suggest that women endured greater loads on the spinal column and head compared to men, possibly indicating a higher involvement in load-bearing and transportation activities.” (Carballo-Pérez et al. 2024) While the authors noted that the skeletal sample size was small ( $>30$ ), that the “women exhibit a higher diversity in vertebral wear profiles in the cervical and thoracic regions, suggesting potential variations with tasks involving the carrying of objects and possibly children, likely using head support.” (Carballo-Pérez et al. 2024) The items used were baskets and tumplines (a pack with a strap over the head; again, see [Tumpline](#) for a brief explanation with an image).

Exploring labor distinctions deepens our understanding of ancient women by illuminating their roles, contributions, and diverse societal experiences. Analyzing how labor was divided by gender allows us to uncover women's various forms of work, including domestic responsibilities, agricultural endeavors, and involvement in artisanal and trade activities. For example, women in Sri Lanka worked as merchants, traders, designers, potters, metallurgists, and more for

thousands of years; yet, why have their contributions seldom been discussed? [KMG Arjuna Manage](#) wrote that

as the prosperity of ancient civilizations rose and fell, the crafts made within them changed according to the demand of society and religious needs. Of course, the significance of these traditions cannot be overlooked; they provided for mundane life as well as fulfilled the kind of spiritual lives that were mainstream in the contemporary era. In all these various ways, female artisans form a vital part of the Sri Lankan cultural legacy. Various crafts emerged through female artisans; among them, there are pottery, weaving, and metal work. These women not only sustained their families with the enterprises but also kept cultures moving with times while giving them their identities. More ironically, the role for the females is hardly provided in historical records. Most of the craftsmanship were offered through the male artisans. (Arjuna Manage 2024)

More women's stories emerge in other areas of the world, revealing how influential, powerful, and critical women were to their communities and countries.

### **Ancient African women**

Ancient African women played crucial roles in various societies, significantly contributing to social, political, and economic structures. For example, in the Kingdom of Kush, women were influential within domestic spheres and often served as queens and leaders. A notable figure is [Queen Amanirenas](#), the Nubian monarch who commanded military campaigns against Julius Caesar and his Roman Empire, as [Kathleen Sheldon](#) and others have noted. Additionally, in the matrilineal societies of West Africa, women participated actively in trade and agriculture, enhancing their family's economic status and ensuring food security (Falola and Jennings 2003). These points highlight women's remarkable complexity and influential roles in ancient African civilizations, dispelling the myth that they were limited to subordinate positions. Christine Saidi's research into Ancient women in the continent of Africa noted that in most countries, there was a leadership structure that "most African societies attempted to attain forms of [heterarchy](#), which meant they often created several centers of authority and aspired to

establish communities where gender relations between women and men were equitable.” (Saidi 2020).

Heterarchy, as Saidi explained, meant that community members are either not ranked or ranked according to the principles and ideals of the people within that group. Therefore, women and men in most ancient African societies saw men and women as equal, and while noting this was not always the case, Saidi noted that maternalism and child-rearing were highly valued; so a conclusion can be drawn that ancient peoples saw pregnancy, birth, and the raising of children as highly valuable, and that their work was as equal to that of the men of their community (Saidi 2020). It remains equally important that we do not confine all women to private spheres, which is a form of Western-centric hierarchy, and reduces or removes women’s agency from their lives and stories.

Additionally, Saidi explained the importance of maternalism throughout the entire African continent:

Additionally, throughout history, most Africans determined status by the amount of labor a group or individual could control, and in a historically underpopulated continent, this meant that motherhood and giving birth to children were very important. The result is that women, as both biological and social mothers and as grandmothers, were highly respected throughout the history of the continent (Saidi 2020).

Saidi emphasized that the roots of women's history can be traced back to Africa, making it earlier than any other place in the world, over 200,000 years ago. Considering the science of anthropology, Saidi related that “Anthropologists of early humanity have proposed that the most successful human families in the earliest eras were based on family units that situated grandmothers at the center, a family structure [still] found in many parts of Africa in the early 21st century” (Saidi 2020). The rise of empires for non-noble and non-royal women had a negative impact in that their status shifted to one with less emphasis on matriarchy.

Further, the genocide of enslavement altered gender roles for women of African countries who were enslaved, as Saidi reminds us that “the Atlantic slave trade severely challenged heterarchical social relations and threatened women’s authority and status in West Africa.”

Another element of this period is the transference of African gender relations to the Americas.

During the 19th century, as Europeans arrived in greater numbers, they imposed new gender ideologies and began to structure how the rest of the world viewed Africans” (Saidi 2020). In unit two, we will explore how Western colonialism and imperialism had a horrific impact on the peoples of African countries. Before you move on, view this short video (start at 2:08): [The](#)

### **Everyday Life of Women in African Civilizations**

#### **Ancient Asia and women**

Start by viewing this lecture: [Ancient Feared Warriors in Chinese History.](#)

Consider: what does this lecture teach us about the roles that women in China had in defense and in times of war? When considering power, one of the most influential and powerful generals of the ancient Asian world was Queen Fu Hao, who lived and then passed around the year 1200 BCE (birth year unknown). Queen Fu Hao, whose burial tomb rivaled Egyptian Pharaohs, was a fierce warrior who, during one battle, commanded an army of over 13,000 men, and led the people from her Anyang, Henan province, to victory in multiple battles (Hogarth 1999). The Asian Art Museum noted the findings in her tomb that

[Queen Fu Hao] she was considered a general under King Wu Ding. In oracle inscriptions, Fu Hao was mentioned more than any of Wu Ding's other consorts and was noted as playing an active role in Wu Ding's military enterprises. She headed wars against tribes in the west, north, southwest, and east, and was in charge of an army of for her military expeditions and campaigns. The presence of weapons in a tomb usually signifies the occupant as male, but the existence of weapons in Fu Hao's tomb showed her power and status as a woman with great military expertise. Fu Hao was also afforded the important responsibility of conducting ritual ceremonies honoring ancestors and gods. (Hogarth 1999).

Therefore, from burial records and extant artefacts, we can learn about these ancient women, and then study how critical their status was, and how they were perceived and honored.

Further, to garner more about women in ancient China, we can look to the work of one of two of the first female historians Ban Zhao (the other being [Pamphile of Epidaurus](#)), who lived from around 45-49 CE to 120 CE, was a teacher who wrote conduct books for women, histories of royal families, and researched and wrote on subjects including botany, history math, medicine, and science. A renowned poet, Ban Zhao documented decades of history at a time when women were not generally known as historians or royal court teachers, and wrote about the importance of keeping the body clean and healthy and eating good food (Lee 2012). Ordinary women's roles varied depending on the family's economic position and status. As Ban Zhao's conduct books revealed, education was not always equal; instead, it centered on emphasizing family, community, marriage, and childbirth. Women managed households, practiced religious ceremonies, and worked in trade. If living in a rural area, women's work would be generally confined to agriculture, but sometimes involved community involvement, such as trade and ceremonies (Lee 2012).

In ancient India, women's everyday roles were similar in many ways to women in ancient China, but there were also exceptions, including during the Vedic period, which took place between 1500 and 1200 BCE. During this period, the Vedas, considered the most sacred of all Indian texts, feature women prominently. (Das 2019). To learn more about the Vedas, check out this site [What you need to know about the Vedas India's most sacred texts](#), and [Famous Female Figures of Vedic India](#)

In ancient Korea, women held various positions within their community, and many held important positions in their societies, from governing their own home to ruling as Queen regnant,

as was seen with the life of Queen Seondeok, who ruled the Silla Kingdom from 632-647 CE.

The Queen was an ardent astronomer, something that her father tried to discourage, yet she ordered the construction of Cheomseongdae, the first observatory of its kind in the region. While women's rights eroded after her death, her legacy lived on in her work to create alliances with other kingdoms and support Buddhism, even ordering the building of a temple in Buddha's honor (TOTAL Traditions of the Ancestors 2016). However, depending on the family's social and economic status, whether they lived in a rural or urban, and what views about women that the father or male head of household held, women's lives varied, and their rights were often constrained, and they did not, generally, have equal access to education. Women did engage in religious life, trade, and commerce, but their lives were extraordinarily complex and cannot be seen, as with all countries in Asia, within a single dimension, because of the variances of circumstances that defined their lives and shaped their roles. Nevertheless, while society was predominantly patriarchal, women's contributions were held in high regard in many areas, especially within their communities and social groupings.

In ancient Japan, women held many critical roles, including worship, household management, commerce, and more. One interesting fact: did you know that women worked as pearl divers? They were, and still are, called Ama, 海女 or “sea women.” This work has been going on for over 5000 years! Author Diane Neill Tichner revealed that the

Ama, 海女 or “sea women,” engage in the ancient practice of freediving. Sans air tanks, these women forage on the ocean floor and among reefs for sea creatures and seaweed. This tradition has endured for 3,000–5,000 years, tracing its origins to the hunter-gatherers of the Jomon Period. Unlike their ancestors, modern-day ama wear wetsuits, fins, and goggles, but the fundamental diving techniques remain unchanged. Ama divers descend to depths of 20 meters (60 feet) in frigid water. They remain submerged for up to two minutes at a time, during which they search out and gather sea cucumbers, seaweed, abalone, and other shellfish. An experienced ama can collect as many as ten sea urchins in a single dive. When they come up for air between dives, an ama's forceful exhalations make a high-pitched sound called isobue, meaning sea whistle. This type of exhaling is

said to cleanse their lungs of carbon dioxide to make room for the deep intake of breath they need for their next dive. (Neill Tincher 2023)

To see the Ama today, take a moment to view [A DAY OF AMA \(海女\) - One Typical Day Of](#)

[A Japanese Ama Diver 海女さんの 1 日紹介動画](#)

The work of the Ama reveals to us how unique this ancient and dangerous profession was. Neill Titchner wrote that while the practice is near extinction, women are still willing to work as Ama. What other roles did women in ancient Japan have? Historian Mallary Silva-Grondin explained that depending on the period of governance, and between religious influences and the emergence of [feudal Japan](#), women's rights and roles rose and fell, in a continuum that has not yet been fully resolved to the present day, as one of our author experts in Unit Five will explain. Women were writers – such as [Lady Muraskai](#), philosophers, managers of their households, and more, yet, as Silva notes,

As the feudal era progressed, and relations became more hostile, women's rights began to revert again. The husband and wife relationship began to reflect that of the lord and subject feudal ideal. During the Tokugawa era the definition of women was clear, “marriage was the only acceptable condition for women. Thus the sole purpose should be learning to please her future husband...” Households were again based on patriarchy, and women once again detained from other women and considered “shallow” in intelligence. Ieyasu Tokugawa wished to freeze social classes and human relations for control and unity purposes, thus resorted to old restrictive customs of women, originally instated due to the Buddhist chauvinism. This restrictive lifestyle defined the status of women leading up to modern-day Japan (Silva-Grondin 2010).

Silva-Grondin also explained that it remains difficult to ascertain ancient women's lives in Japan since only generalities can be drawn, and most records were kept by or about noble women.

Silva-Grondin's point about the impact of centuries of patriarchal actions against women is still present, as we will see in Unit Five, explored in greater detail.

### **Ancient Egypt and women**

In some cultures and communities, Egyptian women were regarded as legally equal to men; women could own property, borrow money, sign contracts, initiate divorce, appear in court as witnesses, and help economies grow due to their labor contributions. As Zagarelli et. al. noted, women were central to ancient economies, including Mesopotamia, stating that “that centralized production with public/communal labor was critical for the emergence of state power and the creation of the conditions allowing commodity relations and independent merchant activity; that the state took an active role in furthering state production but, perhaps quite unintentionally, created the conditions in which independent merchants could emerge; and that collective female labor played a key role in that process.” (Zagarelli et al. 1986, p.1)

Joyce Tyldesley explained, "early Egyptologists understood the political and religious importance attached to the king's position, but were less aware of the complex role played by the queen who stood by his side. Increasingly, it is being realised that the consort, as the feminine element of the semi-divine monarchy, was also vital to the survival of Egypt. Together, king and queen formed a partnership – a perfect balance of male and female – that pleased the gods and allowed Egypt to flourish" (Tyldesley 2020), which indicates that women's roles, even at the highest strata of society, have been historically underestimated or misunderstood.

Therefore, we can see that removing women's agency from ancient societies was incorrect. When we think about ancient women, we see female Pharaohs such as Nefertiti, who insisted that she be portrayed as a Pharaoh without gender as an identifier; for a start on this, please see: [Nefertiti commanded that no more images be made of her as a woman—but only as a ruler](#) Consider why Nefertiti would remove gender from objects that identified them. Was it because Nefertiti understood that female rulers were not taken as seriously as male rulers during their time?

Also consider possibly some of the other Cleopatras (there were seven Cleopatras in total; see [How Many Cleopatras were there in Egypt \(in positions of power or influence\)?](#)) that preceded Cleopatra VII, the last Egyptian Pharaoh, as even if they were not pharaohs in their own right, having their images carefully managed by either themselves directly or by their courtiers was critical at a time when women's power could be revoked by a man, or even by another woman plotting against her.

- **Read:** (Internet Archive login required): [Ancient Egyptian Women](#)
- **Read:** [Egyptian Queen Nefertiti commanded that no more images be made of her as a woman, but only as a ruler](#)
- **View:** [Egypt 231: Isis and Nephthys](#)
- **View:** [Female Pharaohs](#)
- **View:** [The Priestesses](#)
- **Read:** [Queens of Ancient Egypt](#)
- Learn how [Enheduanna](#) was, and is considered one of the first known female poets in history. Her poems of praise to gods and goddesses were highly popular in her time. After her father's death, the new ruler of Ur removed her from her position as high-priestess. She wrote of this injustice:

Me who once sat triumphant, he has driven out of the sanctuary.  
Like a swallow he made me fly from the window, My life is consumed.

He stripped me of the crown appropriate for the high priesthood.  
He gave me dagger and sword - 'it becomes you,' he said to me.

Enheduanna appealed to the goddess [Inanna](#) to redress her injuries:

"It was in your service that I first entered the holy temple,  
I, Enheduanna, the highest priestess. I carried the ritual basket,  
I chanted your praise.

Now I have been cast out to the place of lepers.  
 Day comes and the brightness is hidden around me.  
 Shadows cover the light, drape it in sandstorms.  
 My beautiful mouth knows only confusion.  
 Even my sex is dust. (Reese 2021)

**Finally, as a quick read, and to make connections, read this article: [How ancient Egyptian civilization influenced the modern world.](#)**

Ancient culture flowed into Europe from across the world, and had a global impact that fascinates us today, especially with the histories surrounding women, female rulers, and goddesses. Many images of Egyptian goddesses depict them as powerful, omnipotent, and mysterious. Isis, the Egyptian goddess of fertility and motherhood, was depicted as a benevolent goddess with magical powers, of whose image women would do well to uphold. Isis worship lasted until the sixth century CE, and poems exist that portray images of goddesses such as Isis in various images, but many were maternal in orientation. The pre-eminent physical images of women in ancient Egypt come from artwork, contemporary accounts, and funeral tombs. Enslaved women wore sparse clothing, while women of the upper classes wore straight shift-type linen dresses that usually came down to the ankle. Women also used makeup at this time. Lips and eyes were usually adorned with some cosmetics. Women in Ancient Egypt also wore many different types of jewelry, such as elaborate anklets, armlets, belts, bracelets, earrings, and necklaces (Adele-Marie 2005).

Women of the princely classes often had elaborate headdresses designed for them. Special attention was paid to the power of nature, and nature symbols were often found in headdresses and other items worn by women. Often emphasized was the woman's role in childbirth. Headdresses with flowers or other nature figures such as sea creatures or serpents (worn only by royalty) were usually made of gold and rare jewels and projected an image of

importance and power. Women wore belts or girdles, usually made of gold or precious metals, adorned with jewels or fish symbols. Most jewelry was made out of gold in honour of the sun, which the ancients believed had unique properties. Women and men wore amulets or special pendants that had illustrations on them (Adele-Marie 2005).

These illustrations varied but often included pictures of gods, goddesses, or animals. Almost all women wore jewelry, but only the rich could afford elaborate jewels and costumes. Most wealthy women or members of the princely classes went out of their way to portray themselves as youthful, beautiful, and fertile. Found in funereal tombs, sculpture, artwork, and written works were many depictions of women, but most often, these were of women of the upper or princely classes. This class of women, in their tombs, would have different representations of themselves from birth to death (Adele-Marie 2005).

How can we continue to expand our view of women's lives, roles, and agencies from elsewhere? Ramusack and Sievers remind us that

It is important to avoid three common pitfalls: interpreting women as the exotic, women as victims, and women as anomalies. Stereotypes regarding the non-Western world (particularly those labeling it as "primitive," "backward," or "barbaric") are very prevalent in our society and frequently provide the only knowledge many North Americans have about other cultures. The roles, positions, and statuses of women in non-Western societies are often as central to those stereotypes today as they were when European colonizers first pointed to women's "oppression". (Ramusack and Sievers, 1999. p. xviii)

Further, Ramusack and Sievers note that

because women's political participation did not always appear in obvious places or ways, it has been regarded as peripheral or absent, a view that ignores the complex processes through which power is exerted in societies. An investigation of gender relationships can add a critical element of analysis to our scrutiny of history and to definitions and explanations of the operation of political power and the conceptual category of political activity. (Ramusack and Sievers. 1999. p. xx)

Therefore, it is critical to keep in mind that Western-centric views against women constructed false identities and removed historical agency from centuries of women throughout the non-Western world.

Women were often excluded from the histories of religion, worship, and power for thousands of years. As you progress through these materials, ask yourself: why were women omitted from these histories? Did women represent a threat or challenge to existing power structures? Why has history ignored their contributions, whether as metallurgists, warriors or pearl divers?

## Unit Two

### **Women's Rule and the Early Modern Era**

#### **Introduction**

Start this unit by viewing these three videos:

1. [Empresses, Queens, and Merchants | The Story of Women in Southeast Asian Society](#)
2. [Five Great Women of Southern African History](#)
3. [Queen Njinga, The Female King](#)
4. Read: [Mariko-sama](#), and her origin story
5. Then read [Sultanate of Women](#) before you proceed with the unit below.

#### **Women's Rule**

Throughout history, multiple examples of women have ruled communities, regions, states, countries, nations, and empires. Many names are familiar, such as Queen Elizabeth I of England, or Mary, Queen of Scots, who were both queen regnants, or queens in their own right, or Marie Antoinette, a queen consort (wife of a king). Some queens acted as [regents](#), standing in for their husbands when he was off to war, as with Catherine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII. What about non-Western rulers? Most might recognize Cleopatra VII, a Pharaoh, but may not know about Cleopatra I, the first Egyptian queen to declare herself a pharaoh.

Guida Jackson-Laufer reminded us that as a daughter of a king, the wife of a Pharaoh through a dynastic alliance, and a mother of another Pharaoh, Ptolemy VI and a daughter also named Cleopatra (who also ruled Egypt as later Cleopatra II; the siblings married and co-ruled Egypt; their daughter, Cleopatra III also co-ruled Egypt when she married her uncle; Cleopatra III later was co-ruler of Egypt in her own right with her brothers when her father left her a part of his kingdom through his last will), Cleopatra I was a power regent who kept the throne secure for

her son, declared herself more than a regent, rather as a Pharaoh, and set forth a dynasty that leads us through several female leaders who co-ruled Egypt (Jackson-Laufer 1998). It remains crucial to learn about all women, and to highlight that women who ruled as later scholarship either ignored them completely or reduced their power and agency to yielding no status. Dynastic alliances kept power confined within a family, a network, or an agreed-upon alliance, typically patriarchal in construct (but not always, as history has shown us, sometimes women could be in charge of these alliances). What were dynastic alliances, such as those seen with the first Cleopatra?

Dynastic alliances were forged by royal and other forms of governments to establish peace, promote trade, and create alliances, reflecting both pre-modern and modern noble diplomacy and extending one family's influence into another. These patterns of alliances were ancient and have lasted to this day, and were, and are, found globally. In addition to dynastic alliances, women in positions of power, whether as rulers, regents, or wives, would use whatever path open to them to keep a dynastic family intact, protect their connected lineage, negotiate treaties, stand in for their husbands or other male relatives, and much more, including two specific types of leadership styles.

As we will now see, historian Dr. Cybele Zhang of Stanford University has written extensively on the topic of women's influence in the non-Western noble and princely classes, more specifically women of the Mongol Empire (1206-1368 CE), including Sorghaghtani Beki, the daughter of a ruler, a powerful wife and politician, and both a transactional and transformational leader (For the full essay on Sorghaghtani Beki, see: [Sorghaghtani Beki by Dr. Cybele Zhang](#)) Beki engaged in dynastic alliances, and Zhang outlined why studying women like Sorghaghtani Beki remains critical to do so, as Zhang related:

For many modern people, especially those in the West, the Mongol Empire brings to mind an inherently masculine image. Popular culture perpetuates images of a civilization of godless, nomadic warriors, but this stereotype is problematic and greatly simplifies the authentic, diverse nature of the empire, one of this stereotype's most harmful exclusions: women (Zhang 2021).

Zhang then explained:

The lack of female authors, the true agency of Mongol women is downplayed in subsequent scholarship far too often. In reality, women, noble women in particular, exerted tremendous influence on all avenues of Mongol life. Sorghaghtani Beki — principal wife of Chinggis Khan's son, Tolui — is one such example. Beki held not only military and social power but also shaped the entire governmental structure of the empire. Because of the inherent ambiguity of Mongol succession and the fact that the Great Khan is determined via *quriltai* (a somewhat democratic meeting of imperial leaders), Beki was able to smartly use diplomacy to exploit the malleable *quriltai* structure and certified that power would transfer to her sons instead of their relatives. Beki thus ensured that the Toluid line was supreme, which largely influenced the expanding empire and its political landscape, illustrating the agency of noble Mongol women and their integral role within the nomadic empire (Zhang 2021).

Zhang also explained that although Sorghaghtani Beki lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, she was a feminist, and that her work and life absolutely

proves the true agency of Mongol noble women. Her radical ideas and quest to serve her empire and family manifested in countless benevolent actions and a groundbreaking *quriltai* that altered the course of steppe history forever. Her intelligence and daring illustrated the capability of women, despite its limited documentation, and she instilled lifelong values and morals in her four sons that trickled down to modern countries spanning the Asian continent (Zhang 2021).

When studying the Mongol Empire, the brief reign of the Empress Oghul Qaimish, who reigned as a regent for her son from 1248-1251 CE, may prove of interest. In her brief reign, she was unpopular for several reasons, including promoting low taxation to help the disadvantaged and interacting with an ambassador of Louis IX of France. She warned the ambassador that he had better pay her treasury lest she order an invasion of France. Later, she was brutally tried and executed as a witch, but her story emerges from the records only when extrapolating names and dates from extant court records, as Zhang and other scholars have noted (Cartwright 2019).

Other women rulers of the non-Western regions of the world, as Guida Jackson explored, demonstrated variances of power that men did not always govern. Jackson said that in Ancient Mali, a country in Western Africa, women would rule as empresses, but their “ability to rule depended upon a vote of confidence from other noble women” (Jackson 1998). Jackson then revealed that Western Africa had the highest concentration of female rulers in the continent, including Nigeria, where three women ruled in subsequent order over the Hausa state; in Buganda, the people honored women as rulers of their community, and some communities in Kitara had dozens of women holding the title of princess, with varying agencies of power. However, and quite sadly, “since only the names of outstanding leaders have survived in this region, it is unknown how many other women ruled African kingdoms” (Jackson 1998).

There are many more female rulers of Africa and Asia to explore. For more on the topic of women who ruled in pre-colonial Africa, I further suggest this short video: **Watch: [Queens of POWER: Women Who RULED in Pre-colonial Africa](#)**

Women in Asia had many rulers throughout history, but as we can surmise from Jackson’s analysis, not all have been recorded. In her *Women who Rule: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, Jackson did years of research documenting as many female rulers as she could find globally, and many do come from Asia, including Pandaie, who was the ruler of Pandya in Ancient South India, and from 949-957 CE, the work of [Queen Sembiyam Mahadevi](#), married to King Gandaraditya, is remarkable not that she held governing power, but for her work in establishing many places of worship until her passing in 1001 CE (Jackson 1998). Jackson also cited the story of a queen from Thailand, [Suriyothai](#), who, in 1549 CE, rode out to war using elephants to rescue her husband and died in battle while saving her life. In 2001, the Queen

Mother of Thailand, [Sirikit](#), helped finance a film in Suriyothai's memory, and the trailer can be found here: [The Legend of Suriyothai](#) (TW: war, scenes of the unalived).

Jackson then noted that China had several powerful female rulers, including Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty. The Empress, who was born in 624/625 CE, reigning as a sole ruler from 690 to 705 CE, when she was overthrown, was one of the only women in Chinese history to govern the country in her own right and was accepted as a legitimate leader. Born to noble ancestry, Jackson (1998) related that the Empress began her court career at the court of Tai-tsung, the T'ang Emperor, as a court favourite, and then became involved with his son and heir, and was later named Empress after having a son (Kroll 2019). However, she refused to let her sons rule, destroyed any factions against her, and consolidated her power. Her agency of power saw economic growth, the rise of the Chinese military, the expansion of trade, and more. Even after her passing, historian Dr. Dorothy C. Wong explained that the Empress created a "hybrid kingship that incorporated Buddhist ideology into traditional Chinese kingship with both Daoist and Confucian origins," with a legacy that spread to Japan and beyond (Chen 2022). This video provides more context for her life (TW discussion of violence, death, SUI, and executions):

[Empress Wu Zetian of China](#). Other Asian countries, including Japan (which had eight empresses, but two additional women were said to have ruled as [regnants](#)), had female rulers.

According to [The Empress of Japan, their names and dates of rule](#) are (r. means reigned as regnants in their own right, and may not be representative of dates when married or until they claimed or inherited full power; Wiki stable pages are included for your optional reference):

- Empress [Suiko](#) (r. 592/3-628 CE)
- Empress [Kōgyoku](#) (Saimei, same woman) (r. 642-645 CE, and again r. 655-661 CE)
- Empress [Jitō](#) (r. 690-697 CE)

- Empress [Genmyō](#) (Gemmei) (r. 707-715 CE)
- Empress [Genshō](#) (r. 715-724 CE)
- Empress [Kōken](#) (Shōtoku, same woman) (r. 749-758 CE, and again 764-770 CE)
- Empress [Meishō](#) (r. 1629-1643 CE)
- Empress [Go-Sakuramachi](#) (r. 1762-1771 CE)

To learn about other empresses – and not necessarily regnants - and their influences, check out this podcast: [How Empresses Shaped Japan](#). The talk begins with an ancient Empress of influence, and then discusses Empress Suiko. Historian Lesley Downer notes that Chinese documents helped shape our understanding of these women's lives. Note that it was decided in 1868, and then upheld in the post-Second World War Japanese Constitution (and supported by the Americans), that no woman could inherit the throne again. In the early 2000s, a debate took place when there were no immediate male successors about changing the law to allow Her Imperial Highness the Princess Aiko to become Empress upon the passing of her father, but the debate went away when a son was born to her uncle. For more on this discussion, see [Japanese Imperial Discussion](#). What was the case for women rulers in other areas of Asia?

In Korea, only three women ruled as queen regnants, including Queen Seondeok, the first woman to rule Silla, one of the three Korean kingdoms (r. 632-647). She faced misogyny from officials who refused to recognize her as legitimate because she was female, but she persevered in her work for people with low incomes. It was her work for people experiencing poverty that made her popular, and was a tool used against the misogynists who rebuked her status as a queen regnant because she was a woman (Bernardi 2016). Queen Seondeok even established an observatory, which is still the oldest in the world today, and was designated as a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#). The other two Queen regnants in Korea were Queen Jindeok (r. 647-654

CE), heir and cousin to Queen Seondeok, and Queen Jinseong (r. 887-897 CE), both of Silla. A 2025 podcast on the power of the Dowager Queens of Korea provides further context for how vital women were, even if they were not regnants or regents; check out: [Dowager Queens of Korea with Alban Schmid – The Medieval Podcast, Episode 275](#)

There are many more female rulers of Africa and Asia to explore. For more on women who ruled in pre-colonial Asia, I suggest this short video: **Watch:** [Southeast Asian Women Rulers in History: Fifteen Case Studies.](#)

### **The Early Modern Era**

What were women's lives like in the early modern era? We may know about European women's lives during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but what about women in non-Western civilizations? Here, we begin with a short passage from the book *World in the Making: A Global History* by Bonnie Smith, et. al., where, on page 519, the authors discuss women in China and India in the 1300s:

The Neo-Confucian ideology of Hongwu emphasized the patriarchal authority of the lineage, and his law code deprived women of many rights, including a share in inheritance. It outlawed the remarriage of widows. By 1300, many elite families practiced foot binding, which probably originated among courtesans and entertainers. From around age six the feet of girls were tightly bound with bandages, deforming the bones and crippling them. The feet of adult women ideally were no more than three or four inches long; they were considered a mark of feminine beauty and a symbol of freedom from labor. Foot binding accompanied seclusion in the home as a sign of respectable womanhood. Despite the strictures of patriarchal society, women performed essential economic roles in the nonelite households. Women worked alongside men in rice cultivation and performed most tasks involved in textile manufacture. The spread of cotton, introduced from India in the thirteenth century, gave peasant women new economic opportunities. Most cotton was grown, ginned (removing the seeds), spun into yarn, and woven into cloth within a single household, principally by women. Confucian moralists esteemed spinning, weaving, and embroidery as "womanly work" that would promote industriousness and thrift; they became dismayed, however, when women displayed entrepreneurial skill in marketing their wares (Smith 2022).

The focus here centers on patriarchy, the practice of [footbinding](#), farming, economics, textile work, community, familial duties, and trade. The book is an interesting look at non-Western Civilizations, but women do not figure prominently in it. Wikipedia does not have a category called Women of medieval China. The Wikipedia page on Women in the Middle Ages does not mention Africa.

Where can we find unbiased sources, non-Eurocentric writings, and discussions that present non-Western women's lives during the Middle Ages, and how did everyday people live in tumultuous times? How do we build a cohesive timeline and narrative when the histories ignore non-Western experiences and women are scarcely mentioned?

We can start with this BBC documentary on the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE), which, the narrator explained, was a time of a renaissance, long before Europe entered theirs; see: [BBC 2 China History the Golden Age](#) and we can learn about [Queen Mother Idia of Benin](#), who as a regent, was a trusted aide to her son King Oba Esigie (r. 1504-1550 CE). Idia fought in many battles to protect her people, and as *Daily Art Magazine* noted, she "was known locally as 'the only woman who went to war'" (Singer 2022). The king commissioned five pendants to honor his warrior mother, yet the British colonizers stole the pendants (the article did not relate if all five were taken), [stole thousands of artefacts](#), and perpetrated genocide against the people of Benin; some artefacts were said to have been returned in 2022 (Singer 2022). Benin is part of Nigeria today.

The colonization and enslavement of the peoples of the African continent altered the lives of millions, and the imposition of European rule, genocide, gendercide, and more were not met without fierce resistance. **Watch** this documentary on the Angolan Queen who fought the

Portuguese and became one of the most powerful rulers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: [The Formidable Warrior Queen of Angola | Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba](#)

The Atlantic Slave Trade began in the 15th century by Portugal, and expanded, horrifically, to other European countries who became involved in the enslavement trade as well. This article discusses the African presence in Europe (TW: SA, enslavement, abuse, genocide): [Revealing the African presence in Renaissance Europe.](#)

Watch this short video about two [African Queens Who Fought Slave Traders](#) (starts with a review of Queen Nzinga). Note the narrator mentions how, when this period of history is taught, white European monarchs are reviewed in school, yet African voices are omitted.

Dr. Alexander Ives Bortolot of Columbia University explained that many of the stories of the women of Africa do not survive, but artefacts prove that African women of this age were leaders, priestesses, traders, cultivators, oracles, wives, and mothers, women have occupied key roles in the developments that have shaped the course of African history. The turbulent years following West and Central Africa's **initial contact with Europe** were marked by the emergence of women revered for their formidable political skills and social vision. We know of these women—women such as [Ana Nzinga](#), queen of Ndongo; [Dona Beatriz](#), Kongo prophet; and [Idia](#), queen mother of Benin—largely today largely through **oral histories**, artworks, and, significantly, contemporaneous European documents. There can be no doubt that important and celebrated women existed in other periods of African history, but prior to the era of contact with Europe, written records of their names and achievements simply do not exist. Indigenous narratives about them have not survived to the present day, or have yet to be recognized and recorded. As the study of African history continues, however, the identities of other notable African women will surely be revealed (Bortolot 2003).

**Special note:** the bolded words in the above paragraph will take you to the Met's image exhibit on these women and artefacts that survive. Tracking non-Western women's history in other regions can also be problematic for its omissions in Middle Ages and Renaissance histories.

The website, [The Remedial HERSTORY Project](#), notes in their landing page that they seek to change how women have been ignored by history, and has a page devoted to women in

Asia in the early modern era, which the reader can visit here: [1600-1850 CLOISTERED WOMEN IN ASIA](#) but there are still areas not yet covered; however, the bibliography for the above Women in Asia page contains a richly annotated bibliography; see [Remedial Herstory Editors. "23. 1600-1850 CLOISTERED WOMEN IN ASIA." The Remedial Herstory Project. November 1, 2022. www.remedialherstory.com.](#)

Author and attorney Susan Spann has written a guest post for a website where she explains how people do not understand how critical a role women played in Japanese society in the Middle Ages; see: [The Surprising Role of Women in Medieval Japan](#)

Here, then, are conclusions we can draw thus far: many women

- worked in many professions, both in and out of the home
- fought for their communities, cities, states, and kingdoms
- traded goods such as crops and textiles
- practiced cultural norms
- were merchants
- ran public places and businesses
- raised families
- took care of the sick
- worshiped
- raised crops and livestock
- wrote, read, drew, and engaged in the arts
- were kidnapped and forced into enslavement
- resisted
- were victims of gendercide, femicide, and genocide
- and experienced more and did more than listed above

Yet why do few collective histories include the lives of non-Western women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and why is this age so Eurocentric, when we know that the Song Dynasty in the 10<sup>th</sup> century had a Renaissance that preceded Western Europe by centuries?

## Unit Three

### Imperialism and Colonialism

#### Introduction

Start by reading this introductory essay: [Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Representations of Women in Non-Western Societies by Aihwa Ong.](#)

Then review this site (TW: as the site itself states, "**This section has some heavy moments, so trigger warning for sexual assault**"), [1850-1950 Women's Lives Under Imperialism](#), and choose any documents from this page. Read the document, and then you will find a series of questions at the end. **Select two questions from this reading to compose part of your response for the unit three discussion.**

Now, let us take a further look at how imperialism and colonialism impacted women in non-Western areas. A few selected countries were chosen for part of this analysis, but for a complete list of countries whose people were dominated, enslaved, and controlled by Western powers, see this site: [Colonialism meant that for centuries, many territories and people were ruled from elsewhere.](#)

**TW:** SA, genocide, enslavement, gendercide, femicide, abuse, images of the unalive, torture.

#### Imperialism

Imperialism is extending an empire or a country's (also known as polities) power and influence over another region, territory, country, or nation through military forces or diplomacy, intending to exploit and dominate. See this short video explanation: [What is imperialism?](#)

Women under imperialism faced oppression, enslavement, torture, displacement, removal, abuse, genocide, gendercide, femicide, SA, kidnapping, crimes against humanity, war

crimes, crimes against the peace, and multiple stages of genocide as Genocide Watch lists: [The Ten Stages of Genocide.](#)

- **Read (or watch**, the video is linked at the top of the page) for discussion by Gregory Stanton, whose ancestor was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a founder of the American women's rights movement: [The Call by Dr. Gregory Stanton.](#)
- **Watch or listen to** (start at 3:45) [Women and the Legacy of Imperialism in the Pacific.](#)

**TW:** SA, genocide, enslavement, gendercide, femicide, abuse, images of the unalive, torture.

## Colonialism

Colonialism refers to controlling, stealing, and exploiting another country's territory, resources, and people. See this short video explanation: [What is colonialism?](#)

Women under colonialism faced oppression, enslavement, torture, displacement, removal, abuse, genocide, gendercide, femicide, SA, kidnapping, crimes against humanity, war crimes, crimes against the peace, and multiple stages of genocide as Genocide Watch lists: [The Ten Stages of Genocide.](#)

- **Watch** [Female resistance against colonialism: how women resisted German colonialism in Cameroon.](#)
- **Listen to** [Podcast: How women kept their people's history and culture alive: Nambian Women.](#)
- **Watch** [Women in Southeast Asian Societies: An insightful discussion about the historical position of women in Southeast Asian countries and the reasons for relative gender equality in comparison with East or South Asia, with Dr. Barbara Andaya.](#)
- **Watch** [Colonial roots of the genocide in Rwanda | DW Documentary](#)

For an interactive timeline imperialism and colonialism map: [European overseas colonies and their colonizers over time](#) (for an ADA-compliant version, see: [Atlas of the colonization and decolonization of Africa](#) and [Atlas of colonialism](#)) Then, here is a map showing colonialism in Asia (courtesy of Wikipedia):



## Unit Four

### **Women and World War One, Women in the 1920s and 1930s**

Start here:

- Review this site about Yogmaya Neupane, who was from Nepal, and was renowned as a feminist, activist, and more: [Yogmaya Neupane: The Unknown Rhetorician and the Known Rebel](#)
- **Then read:** [Sophia Duleep Singh \(1876–1948\) was an Indian princess and a formidable figure in the women's suffrage movement](#)
- Read: [The Surprisingly Important Role China Played in WWI](#) (notice in the third picture there is a woman worker on the far right, yet the article never mentions her, nor does it refer to women).

#### **Introduction**

How did women's roles change during the First World War, the 1920s, and the 1930s?

The two decades saw millions of lives lost in the Great War (the First World War) in some areas, creating a gender imbalance, a pandemic, and the times were fraught with economic chaos, tremendous hardship, and significant social and cultural change. Start by watching these films and then complete the readings. Note that some images and films were created in the early 20th century, and the language and other images used will not be considered appropriate today.

#### **Women and World War One**

On 28 July 1914, Austria-Hungary and Serbia engaged in conflict, which soon escalated globally. Germany entered the war on the side of Austria-Hungary; France, Russia, and the United Kingdom, as allies against Austria-Hungary and Germany, followed. This international

conflict involved many other nations and lasted until 11 November 1918. What were women's roles?

- To start, review this site: [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/womens\\_mobilization\\_for\\_war](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/womens_mobilization_for_war)
- Read: [Where Women Worked](#)
- Read: [Women in World War One: Societal Impacts](#)

During the First World War, an analysis of the same tended to have a Euro-American focus. However, women from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere were also involved in the war, working on the home front, in medicine, raising funds for the war effort, documenting the war, working in war-time jobs or non-war jobs replacing men who had left for war, and more, but these experiences varied as not all women worked as nurses, as one example. In Unit Five, you will see an essay on how the war had an outcome on women in Asia, and I caution the reader as there is discussion of SA, gendercide, and femicide. Yet, why have women in non-Western societies not been acknowledged for their service during the First World War, at a time when there was also a global flu pandemic that took the lives of millions?

First, historian [Stephanie Seul](#) revealed that women also worked as war correspondents in areas around the world where the war took place, explaining that.

Women did not limit their war reporting to the so-called 'woman's angle'. Their reporting was as diverse as the fronts they observed. The ability of women to visit the front was often restricted, but they were determined to cover all aspects of the war. Taking personal risks, they visited the front even though fighting was occurring. They reported on combat, the suffering of (wounded) soldiers, the destruction of cities, villages and landscapes. Women also wrote about nursing, relief work and the home front. They published their eyewitness accounts and photographs in well-known newspapers and magazines, generally under their own names. Women covered the First World War from many different perspectives, thus complementing and widening the war images provided by men (Seul 2021).

Women working as war correspondents, as Seul explained, covered the war as embedded journalists did, and do, not just as writers who focused on the war from a female viewpoint. Seul explained that the correspondents covered women in the war, but they covered other topics as well, and as a result, Seul's critical work has amplified the voices of dozens of women who witnessed – and documented – the First World War almost everywhere it took place or in countries impacted by the war, including India.

India, as it was still under British occupation during the First World War, declared war when the British did on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1914. Santanu Das reminds us in their essay [Women's Mobilization for War \(India\)](#) that over 1,000,000 men from India served in the war, but when attempting to reach out to uncover women's experiences during that time, Das noted that when looking to answer if women worked in war-time jobs, were anti-war activists, and more, what the record "largely greets us is a deafening silence" (Das 2024). Moreover, Das underscored that while new research is being done on Indian women and the First World War, it remains critical to understand that "researching the history of Indian women during the First World War involves a two-fold expansion in both how fully we extend the scope of war studies from "combat" to "conflict" and how we rethink our methodology" (Das 2024). Das conducted a thorough literary review of the topic, mentioning new scholarship, including books, and using documents such as letters, but related that "like the war stories of their male counterparts, there is no single or homogeneous Indian female experience of the First World War: diversity was the key, and obliquity the tenor" (Das 2024).

Das has also discussed how speeches given by women of royalty were another way to approach the topic, and analyzed how women of other groups used speeches to recruit soldiers, bolster moral, and referred explicitly to the feminist activist [Ramabhai Ranade](#) (1863-1924) as an

example to unpack women's experiences during this conflict, and within these speeches, we find a note of compassion for women and others to help returning soldiers from battle, as the need would soon be great. (Das 2024). What about women in other non-Western regions? To examine women in Korea, review Ellie Pearlman's essay in Unit Four, which covers the Japanese occupation era, which lasted from 1910 to 1945. For further context, after you review Ellie's essay, consider the analysis from historians [Guskova Ekaterina](#) and [Vadim Kuzmin](#), who noted in 2020 in their [peer-reviewed study](#) that

In recent years, the issue of the status of women in South Korea has been so acute that even special institutions have been created to protect women's rights. However, this problem is far from new for Korea, and its origins date back more than a hundred years ago. Many South Korean researchers note that the annexation of Korea by Japan and the establishment of the colonial regime served as an incentive to change the role of women in society. During the 35 years of Japanese colonial rule in Korea, the phenomenon of female employment emerged, and the so-called «new women» also emerged as a social phenomenon. The «new women» in their self-awareness were closer to European women, which was unique for Korea, which was isolated and had limited contact with the outside world. In a short time, they set a lot of popular trends and in many ways laid the foundation for the further development of feminism in the country (Ekaterina and Kuzmin 2020).

In (TW: SA and genocide discussion) West Africa, Baylor University historian [George N. Njung](#) looked at the role that West African soldiers held in the First World War, while emphasizing that Europeans who recruited men from this area of the continent displayed, and horrifically encouraged femicide (the murder of women and girls by someone known to them or targeted explicitly by someone known to their family or associates) and gendercide (the intentionally murdering of women and girls in a horrifically brutal way, typically in times of conflict or war). See (TW: SA and genocide discussion), [Gendercide Awareness Project](#) for more definitions.

Njung revealed that German recruiters kidnapped, tortured, and enslaved women from [Edea](#), a city in the country of Cameroon, and promoted rape as a reward to West Africa soldiers

who would sign up with Germany to serve on the Western Front in Europe. Additionally, Njung revealed that due to both conscription and recruitment that labor shortages emerged, and both women and men were then consequently enslaved to work in positions left by those forced or who willingly signed up to serve with the British, part of the Allied Powers, against the Germans, part of the Central Powers. (Njung 2024). Both women and men who resisted forced conscription and enslavement, as Njung discussed, including in “northern Nigeria, wartime recruitment also contributed to violence, when as many as 200 rebels and three dozen unarmed men and women – including many Baloguns – were killed by colonial officials to quell the resistance” in this case, the colonizers were British. (Njung 2024). Other European countries used enslavement, rape, and gendercide in an attempt to stop resistance against conscription and forced labor before, during, and after the war, as [Michael Pesak](#), historian from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany, explained that Belgium was guilty of the same crimes:

In the years of the colonial conquest and the Congo Free State (ca. 1883-1905), violence intermingled with economics and politics: the FP committed numerous atrocities against the civilian population. Plundering and pillaging, raping and abducting women, and murdering and mutilating Africans became a common part of its culture of violence that was not only tolerated by the European officers, but also regarded as a necessity for subduing African resistance (Pesak 2017).

What does the First World War reveal about women’s roles? Women formed resistance movements, fought against the war, worked as recruiters and correspondents, produced food in rural and urban areas, and cared for soldiers. Women were also used as a weapon of war, forced into enslavement, and were victims of crimes against humanity, as seen as perpetrated by the Belgian, French, British, and others against women in various African countries. After the war, women led independence movements, and fought for African nationalism against European colonizers, such as was seen in the Women’s War, also known as [the Aba Women’s War of 1929](#) that took place in Nigeria, and in other areas, as historian Susan Geiger explained, that

“women were, in almost all movements of African nationalist struggle, including the armed struggles waged in Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, Zimbabwe and Namibia” (Geiger 1990) while further admitting that scholars should have done a better job researching and writing about non-Western women’s voices and work as an instrument of change towards rights, independence and more, whether in Cameroon or India or elsewhere in the non-Western world; that recognition of women’s contributions during the First World War and beyond is still in progress and more must be done to amplify women’s experiences, work, and voices. The First World War ended on 11 November 1918. Optional readings on the impact of the 1918-1919 Flu Pandemic, see (TW): [Lessons from the 1918-1919 Spanish Flu Pandemic in Africa](#) and [Remembering the ‘Spanish Flu’ in Asia](#)

## The 1920s

In the aftermath of the flu pandemic and war, the 1920s saw a decade of enormous change. These readings provide context for economic resistance, where women fought for rights, and unfair economic conditions, including punitive tax measures; read: [African Women’s Role in Resistance against Colonization](#). The 1920s were a transformative decade marked by significant changes in politics, culture, fashion, and more. Women advocated for independence and agency during this time, highlighting the intersections between gender and politics. They fought for various issues, including ending colonialism and greater political representation, among other social changes. Women’s roles in global societies were beginning to shift, but work was still to be done.

For readings and short videos to learn more about women in the 1920s, see:

- The Japanese government tried to ban the flappers, Moga (モガ), watch: [Japan cracks down on flappers in 1924](#)
- Read [The Flappers in India during the 1920s and 1930s](#)

- Watch this short on 1920s [Bollywood Actresses](#)
- Did you know that [Rukmini Lakshmipathi](#) was the first woman elected to the Madras Legislature?
- Learn about Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first woman to be admitted to a medical college in her region, and the first woman to be admitted to the legislature under British occupation. Watch this remarkable story about Dr. Reddy, who fought for the rights of girls and women: [Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy](#).
- Learn about thousands of women who rose and fought for justice and independence in Nigeria, in the short documentary: [The Aba 1929 Women's War Against British Colonial Power](#).

## The 1930s

When examining women in non-Western societies during this decade, historian [Lynn M. Thomas](#) discussed the difficulty women of colour faced in white-dominated South Africa, and revealed that as the decade opened, many Black women embraced modern, almost post-flapper aesthetics as a choice, as Thomas noted, newspapers such as *Bantu World* revealed. However, the difficulty Black women in the then segregated South Africa endured came from white-detractors who accused the “African modern girl of ‘prostituting’ her sex and race by imitating white, coloured or Indian women, and by delaying or avoiding marriage, dressing provocatively and engaging in premarital and inter-racial sex” further related that even “cosmetics use was one of the most contentious issues surrounding the black modern girl because it drew attention to the phenotypic dimensions of racial distinctions” (Thomas 2006). Thomas elucidated in more detail how global a phenomenon the new modern girl was, and how women who followed the trend eschewed some or all of the societal and cultural expectations that relegated women to a private sphere based on raising children and managing their household.

Thomas explored how film, magazines, and other items that appeared in South Africa definitively influenced many Black women, and the use of the word girl before modern, especially by Black writers, explaining that

Whites' use of 'girl' and 'boy' to refer to African adults in these colonial and segregationist contexts, as in the Jim Crow United States, was a racial insult. But when Black writers prefaced 'girl' with 'modern', they signaled something unsettlingly progressive rather than decidedly pejorative. Their writings and related visual representations reveal the modern girl as a social category and performative style, a style that could be adopted by married and unmarried women alike, and interpreted as anything from disreputable to respectable (Thomas 2006).

Therefore, Thomas suggested, a reclamation of the word girl began, and shifts in representation of beauty away from white-dominant segregationist thought, as expressed in Black-only beauty contests, Black women appearing in advertisements, openly embracing the use of cosmetics, flapper style of dress in some areas, and more (Thomas 2006).

Critics made racist accusations towards these women of being engaged in "prostitution" or promoting an "immoral" lifestyle; yet, as Thomas noted, the difference in how women saw images, purchased products, and embraced the modern girl aesthetic, no matter how small or how large, they did so at a time when Black men controlled the modern girl narrative and White men controlled makeup companies, unlike "Black women in the United States [who] shaped discussions of beauty culture and owned some of the largest cosmetics companies" (Thomas 2006). In conclusion, Thomas noted that a deeper look into interwar periods in African countries is necessary to understand a fuller picture of how widespread the modern flapper image was, and how it was dispensed, produced, consumed, and depicted.

For a look at how Western and other media depicted women in Asia in the 1930s, some of which preserve ancient depictions of women, see these short film clips:

(\*\*Content Warning:\*\* Some clips and items we examine or watch may reflect the language and attitudes of their time. The material may contain offensive words, images,

and portrayals, including racist or derogatory depictions and language directed towards others that were not acceptable then and are still inappropriate today.)

- Watch: [Filipino women's 1930s dress styles](#).
- Watch: [Kristine Harris: The New Woman in 1920s and 1930s China \(Excerpt\)](#)
- Watch: [Life and Tradition in Japan, 1930s](#)
- Watch: [Exhibition offers insight into Vietnam in the 1930s](#)
- Watch (TW: sensitive subjects and images, including sexual enslavement): [Mani](#) Kaul's 1975 twenty-minute documentary about women's lives in India, meant to be reflective over the preceding decades: [The Indian Woman - An Historical Assessment](#), In this discussion, a female narrator explores the history of women's work, highlighting the economic disadvantages faced by women throughout history. She contrasts the experiences of modern women with those of women from the past, addressing aspects such as clothing, literature, food, child raising, and more, including Indian women's activism against British colonial rule (which ended in 1947 when India gained independence).

## Unit Five

### Women and World War Two, Post-War Gender Roles, Current Issues

#### Introduction

What were women's roles from the Second World War to today?

#### Women and the Second World War

##### *Allied women*

Women worked in or volunteered for different positions to help the Allied war effort during World War Two. In non-Western regions, such as India, women worked, just as women did elsewhere, both in military service and serving on the home front. Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, a medical doctor, was the Minister of Women's Affairs and led an all-female combat unit against the Japanese (Captain Lakshmi Sahgal 2023). Women's work in India during the Second World War helped build a foundation for women fighting for independence, just as women did elsewhere in the world for the Allies. Women's contributions in non-Western countries are seldom discussed in an analysis of the Second World War and cannot be underestimated or overlooked, just as in the United States of America, where over eight million women worked in munitions factories and many non-combat positions, millions of women in Burma, China, Egypt, India, the Philippines, in African countries including Ethiopia, where heroes like "Lekelesh Bayan, who watched her husband get killed, is just one of thousands of women who fought alongside Ethiopian men during the Italian occupation from 1935 to 1941" (Habtu and Byfield 2015). Women worldwide resisted the Axis in multiple ways, such as working in jobs ranging from clerical jobs to places in armament factories, building weapons, joining resistance movements, and more, just as women did in other Western Allied countries. Women were also employed as radio operators or drivers. Hundreds of thousands of allied women assisted the

armed forces. Their experiences differed because of socioeconomic status, race, and whether they were single, married, or had children. Conditions and status also varied for working war women depending on the Allied country. Allied women made invaluable contributions to the war effort regardless of their position.

When World War Two began on 1 September 1939, Great Britain and France were the first two countries to declare war on Nazi Germany. Until the Americans were involved after the Japanese attack on the military installation at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on 7 December 1941, women in Europe not allied with Nazi Germany and their collaborators worked valiantly, often voluntarily, to help their countries stave off the Nazi menace. Women in France who opposed the Nazis fought in the resistance and secretly worked as spies, nurses, assassins, or in any position they could help defeat the Nazi regime; as resistance to the Nazis grew throughout Europe, so grew the necessity for women's work.

During the Vichy regime and Nazi occupation of France, it was difficult for women to work in any position in opposition to the Nazis or the collaborative Vichy regime since the penalty would be imprisonment in the concentration camps or death. This commonality was found in other Nazi-occupied countries, where the crime of working against the Nazis would be the same. In Axis occupied Northern African countries, women also contributed to the fight against the Nazis by participating in many of the same ways that other women did, from joining resistance movements, and more, so it must be emphasized that women worked in many different capacities throughout the war, and their positions included administrators, drivers, and mechanics. Women also worked as nurses, radio operators, spies, wardens, and in dozens of other positions. In some countries, women joined the armed forces, working in many positions, from drivers, airplane transport, nursing, and air wardens. Soviet women not only worked in the

positions described above but also flew combat missions, worked in agriculture and factories, and fought on the ground. Women in China took on various roles, including fighters, resisters, cooks, soldiers, nurses, activists, recruiters, tailors, teachers, and transporters. Women fought against the Axis in unprecedented numbers to help with the war effort. American First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was critical in gaining both political and public acceptance for the idea of women entering the war workforce, and her tireless efforts on behalf of women's rights during the war never abated, in a global context. She recognized that women were needed after men were sent to fight in the European and Pacific theaters.

Again, women who went to work in the factories trained for various skilled positions, from electricians to welders, jobs that in the past were viewed as work that only men could perform. Women proved this stereotype wrong, succeeding in skilled assembly and manufacturing. Women assembled or built airplanes, bombs, tanks, and other war machines. Women worked as crane operators and truck drivers and in various occupations in shipyards. Non-factory war work also opened up for women and included positions such as chemists and researchers. War work opened avenues for women of different backgrounds, races, and ethnicities.

Women who came from various backgrounds were often able to find war work because the demand for workers was so great. Government and factory recruiters would offer training programs in high schools or other areas to reach as many women as possible. Women who worked for the Allies during World War Two should be forever commended for their contributions. The war may not have been won without these women's sacrifice, labor, and heroism. Women's work was invaluable to the war effort and helped secure an Allied victory.

### *Axis women, the enemy, and the resistance*

The Axis powers employed women during World War Two. The Axis refers to Nazi Germany, Italy, Japan, and other collaborative governments. Nazi Germany employed the most significant number of women, but women in all Axis countries worked in different positions that included clerical work, assembly, air wardens, agrarian work, military auxiliaries, industrial work, and camp guards. Once the Allies entered the war and began to secure victories over the Axis powers, women were conscripted for work duties. The patriarchal government structures of the Axis powers not only removed political and social advances women had made in previous decades and did not allow for full acceptance in the workforce, equal treatment, or fair hours or wages for women who worked in war industries in war jobs, although women in Nazi Germany held leadership positions and had demonstrable agencies of power.

Before World War Two, society was predominantly patriarchal in Japan, and women had few rights. Therefore, in the context of employment, few women worked except in jobs that accepted women. Women usually worked in textiles or the agrarian sector. Industries where heavy machinery was employed or where any mechanical assembly related to war work was performed, for the most part, did not accept women. Women who did work tended to be single or widowed, as married women usually did not work unless it was directly for a family-owned business or because of severe economic necessity. After Japan declared war on the United States on 7 December 1941, Japanese women were still not accepted into the war industry. By 1943, with Allied victories over Japanese forces increasing, all women were required to work in the war industry, and they experienced enormous hardships, from terrible working conditions to tremendously lower wages than their male counterparts.

In Italy, women also faced discrimination in the regime of Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, as opposed to the emancipation of women. Women could find work in government positions – generally administrative –, and if they did find the rare position in business or industry, women still faced low wages, long hours, and unequal treatment. Jobs were not as plentiful for women in the Italian industry as in the other Axis countries. Italy was slower to industrialize; most jobs for women were found in the agrarian sectors. Women in Vichy, France, could work in state-sponsored agencies or the agrarian sector. As the war progressed, both the Nazi and Vichy governments conscripted French women for labor in war production.

It is important to note that thousands of Italian, French, and other women worked in resistance movements against the Axis powers, including to save Jews and others persecuted and marked for murder by the Nazi regime. The Holocaust, which was the intentional, systematic, and state-sponsored act of mass murder and persecution; more specifically, it was an intentional, systematic, bureaucratic, nearly successful ideological attempt to totally and cosmically murder the Jews and millions of others, and this was a Central Act of State undertaken by the Nazis and their collaborators. Yad Vashem noted that “The occupation of France and the establishment of the anti-Semitic Vichy regime brought 415,000 North African Jews – most of the Jews on the subcontinent – into the orbit of persecution.” (Yad Vashem 2024). Women in countries such as Libya and Tunisia faced persecution, rape, and murder by the Nazis and their collaborators. Yet, few of these stories have emerged in Holocaust narratives until scholars such as Nina Lichtenstein, who in 2017, noted that she found only twenty testimonies by women from Northern Africa out of over 50,000 accounts.

One of the stories Lichenstein wrote about was Gisèle Braka, who saved children, fought in the resistance, worked for the Red Cross as a volunteer nurse, and later, after the war, fought

for children's rights, especially girls, and then people from throughout the country of Congo in Central Africa who had faced exploitation, both labor and financial from France (Lichtenstein 2017). Braka was a hero, and women like her who fought with courage and bravery have stories that need to be amplified in the context of the Second World War and beyond.

It remains difficult to ascertain the total number of women working for and against the Axis countries. Existing governments destroyed many records as the Axis powers lost the war, and although some estimates exist, based on extant records, complete, reliable figures of the total number of women employed by Japan, Italy, Vichy France, and Nazi Germany in war industries are, at best, estimates. Women's rights deteriorated under these regimes, and few advances for women were made in the workplace. Women who entered the workforce, not as prisoners for the Axis powers, usually because of economic necessity or due to conscription., and the very same regimes that sought to remove any gains women had made in terms of rights also created environments that demanded women enter war industrial work because men were deployed to fight in the war. War made work possible for women, but much of the work women did for the Axis powers did not allow for measurable cultural, socioeconomic, or political advances. After the war, post-war reconstruction created an entirely different employment structure, and women still had to overcome not just the legacy of war work but attitudes towards the acceptance of women in the workplace, regardless of profession or position.

**Here you can learn about upstanders who found against the Nazis by choosing to save others, and in some cases, paid the ultimate sacrifice for standing up against hate and evil:**

Watch and learn about the upstanders: [Tolé Madna and Mima Saina: Upstanders who saved a Jewish baby from the Nazis](#)

Watch: Learn about the upstander, [Noor Inayat Khan, an Allied Special Operations Executive \(SOE\) agent who fought for the French resistance](#), and then watch [A Life of Bravery: Noor Inayat Khan](#).

## Post-War Gender Roles

To introduce you to the topic, as the Second World War ended, here are a few readings and videos to first introduce you to the topic that explore how radically women's roles shifted after the war.

- Read: [Women's Rights After War: On Gender Interventions and Enduring Hierarchies](#)
- Read: [WW2: Did the war change life for women?](#)
- Read: [Why are non-Western roles missing from post-Second World War narratives? See: Africa's Role in WWII Remembered](#)

Who are some women changing women's roles in the non-Western world today? Visit these readings and videos to learn more:

- Watch: [Former Minister of Human Rights, Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, Yemen's First Female Ambassador, Former Minister for Human Rights, Journalist, Activist, and more](#)
- Read about: [Captain Brooke Castillo, Asia's first woman commercial jet pilot](#)
- Read any article from American-Iranian journalist and *Here On Earth* producer [Saideh Jamshidi](#)
- Read: [Reem Al-Sultan from Saudi Arabia](#)

From the Second World War to the present day, what do the stories of women in non-Western civilizations teach us? Let us review women's experiences in non-Western civilizations during and after the Second World War. Sponsored by the Department of Modern Languages and the EGHPS Department at Oakton College and made possible by a generous grant from the Oakton Educational Foundation, and held over two evenings in May 2025, the *Historical Examinations of Women in Non-Western Civilizations in the Second World War and Beyond: A Virtual Conference* explored women's experiences in non-Western civilizations during and after the Second World War.

The investigations included several countries and situations, including the plight and resistance of Korean women during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and Japanese women's status post-Second World War. The conference proceedings are published below, and credit goes to each contributor. My deepest thanks to my friends, colleagues, and former students, as their invaluable scholarship will conclusively contribute to the field of women's history. We start with Dr. Rabia Ali, who will examine women's movements from the end of the Second World War to the present day. The subsequent essays will cover the same chronological focus but may refer back to ancient history to create a narrative trajectory that best brings the reader into the present to supply further context.

We have an additional non-conference but equally important submission from the Reverend Susy Dand, Associate Vicar at St. Mary's Hanwell in London. In her essay, we will explore the importance of access to menstrual hygiene and learn about her work in various countries across Africa and Asia.

## **The History of Women's Movements in Post-Partition Pakistan**

**by Dr. Rabia Ali**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I trace the history of women's movements in post-partition Pakistan. Elite women initially led the feminist movements in urban centers and largely focused on welfare issues. The military dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq during the 1970s completely changed the direction of such movements. This was the time that gave birth to strong women activists who defied the newly established rules of the Zia government, which had introduced the Hudood Ordinance in his attempt to Islamize the Pakistani state. Under this ordinance, the Pakistani women who were already experiencing discrimination in the male-dominated Pakistani culture were further pushed into the dark ages. The feminist activists, most of whom were educated in the West, returned home to resist the Zia regime and the laws it had introduced. The paper also highlights some of the contemporary women's movements in the country, including the Aurat March and the "Me Too" Movement.

### **Introduction**

The women's movement in Pakistan has a complex history, shaped by various factors including colonialism, nationalism, Islamization, dictatorship, democracy, and the War on Terror. In this paper I offer a historical analysis of the women's movements in Pakistan. The paper starts with a brief background of early movements in pre-partition India. This will be followed by a discussion of post partition and contemporary women rights movements in the country.

While not explicitly focused on women's rights, some early reform movements, such as those led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, advocated for women's education and empowerment. Fatima Jinnah

played a pivotal role in the Pakistan Movement and later formed the Women's Relief Committee, which evolved into the All Pakistan Women's Association. Begum Ra'na Liaquat Ali Khan the wife of then Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was also one of the early women leaders after partition. She established the All Pakistan Women's Association and played a key role in women's political empowerment. It is pertinent to mention here that the early women's movements were initiated by elite women as an attempt to provide welfare to urban women in the post partition Pakistan.

### **Zia-ul-Haq Era (1977-1988)**

The progress made by the early women right movements was stalled during the Zia-ul-Haq Era (1977-1988). During this period Zia's Islamization policies had a negative impact on women. The Women's Action Forum (WAF) emerged as a prominent voice against discriminatory laws and for women's rights. Forms of resistance in the post Zia era included continued advocacy for women's rights, including issues like domestic violence, honor killings, and access to education and employment. Emergence of new organizations and movements, such as the Aurat March (Women's March) marks the beginning of a new era for women in the country. In this paper, I aim to trace the history of women's movements in Pakistan, discuss the impact of the movement on women, highlight the role of feminists who defied the process of Islamisation, and provide an overview of some of the recent women's movements in the country.

### **Phase 1: The Pre Partition Era (1857 – 1947)**

Women movements in Pakistan can be traced to pre partitioned India. Women in the pre-independence India struggled for several issues including political participation, lack of education opportunities, polygamy, and denial of inheritance rights (Fleschenberg, 2010). The first signs of activism among (Muslim) women emerged in response to the change in education system when

the British replaced the traditional education systems with their own. Muslims were caught between the desire to acquire modern knowledge or to keep tradition (Saigol, 2016). Even the modernist leaders like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan supported education of the Muslim men but did not favor secular education for women. Voices in favor of women's education were raised only in 1886 at the annual meeting of the Muhammadan Educational Conference. A women's teacher training college was established in Calcutta in 1899 as girls' education was opposed on the pretext of unavailability of women teachers. Muslim women were excluded from education fearing that it would loosen males' control on them.

### **Phase 2 (1947 – 1977)**

The period starting after the independence of Pakistan to the second martial law characterizes a relatively less active time for feminism in the country. Religious groups which opposed Pakistan became active to exert their influence once the country got established. This influence existed both inside and outside the constituent assembly. These religious groups blackmailed the ruling elite either by labelling them un-Islamic or through protests and agitation. Women activism during this period can be divided into two categories: activism for social work and political activism (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987).

Welfare related activism started soon after the independence. People were displaced on enormous scale on both sides of the border under communal tensions. More than seven million of refugees poured into Pakistan during the first five months (ibid). Women rose to the occasion and participated in relief work. Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Khan, the wife of the first prime minister of the country, led the movement by starting women's Voluntary Service (WVS) in 1948. Begum Rana Liaqat Ali established a "Craftsman Colony in Karachi in 1949 for the purpose of women empowerment to provide skills to poor women to make them economically independent (Khan

and Javed 2004). Women participated in a wide range of relief activities including first aid, distribution of food and clothing, dealing with health problems, epidemics, and providing moral support. The initiative was successful and received support from people as well as the government. Other two initiatives, also under the patronage of Mrs. Khan, were not well received. In the face of conflict with India, she wanted the women to get defense training. For this purpose, the Pakistan Women's National Guard (PWNG) and the Pakistan Women's Naval Reserve (PWNR) were formed in 1949. It was a bold step as wanted the women to take part in every walk of life in the new state. But the initiative attracted vicious criticism, especially the views unveiled women getting training from men did not go well. Finally, both the setups fizzled out (Saigol, 2016).

The contemporary women's movement in Pakistan goes back to the mid-1980s, when its head of state, General Zia-ul Haq, utilized religion to legitimize his standard and connived with strict powers. He proclaimed, among different measures, the Hudood Ordinances (1979). These establish the most vindictive and prejudicial bit of enactment that Pakistani women have ever observed. Zia's policies included an Islamic dress code for public employees, the 1984 Law of Evidence that reduced woman's testimony to half that of a man in the court of law, the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance 1984 that privatized the crime of murder, and the 1979 Hudood Ordinances, especially the one that conflated rape with adultery, thereby making it impossible for the victim to prove her case (Ali, 2000, as cited in Fleschenberg, 2010).

The repressive changes in the legal system did not go well and the reaction was that of confrontation. The feminist activists, most of whom were educated in the West, returned home to resist the Zia regime and the laws it had introduced. However, the actual spark that ignited women activism was provided by an event when a fifteen-year-old woman was sentenced to flogging because of marrying a man of a lower-class background contrary to her parent's wishes (Rouse,

1986). At this point, professional, educated, middle-class women came together and formed the Women Action Forum (WAF) in 1987. This organization served as a key platform for women's movement in the years to follow. Seven other women's groups including APWA endorsed WAF and agreed to endeavor from a single platform for the achievement of their common goals, for advocating human rights of women, minorities and other marginalized citizens who suffer under unjust systems, discriminatory laws, poverty and patriarchy (Fleschenberg, 2010).

A number of features distinguish women activism under WAF: it used a non-hierarchical structure of organizing in order to allow its member organizations retain their independence; it decided not to accept financial support from government or international organizations to avoid possible cooperation and thereby dent its independence. Regarding its oppositional strategy toward the government, as reported by (Fleschenberg, 2010), WAF applied different tools including demonstrations, gatherings, signature campaigns, petitions, seminars on education, health, law and so on, press conferences, and lobbying with trade unions, professional associations or political parties to include women's issues in their agendas.

Despite the fact that Women's movement under WAF achieved some successes, e.g., in initiating a national debate on women's issues, and delaying the implementation or achieving a less gender-incriminatory legislation (Haq, 1996). Fleschenberg (2010) believes the impact of these efforts remained minimal for an average woman in urban as well as in rural areas, especially for their legal, socio-economic and political status. Shaheed (1999) agrees to this marginal impact but for a different reason: involvement in the activism had different consequences for women from different classes. "For less privileged women, losing jobs was a greater danger than for upper-middle-class activists who were better equipped to handle the consequences. If jailed, poorer women were more likely to be raped than better-connected activists (p. 156).

For around ten years, WAF represented voices of Pakistani women and their problems. In this period, it is prevailing with regards to putting ladies' issues on the motivation. No ideological group proclamation was finished without referencing women's rights, and open talk about women's inconsistent status in the public eye was explained in and past the media (Mumtaz, 2005).

By 1988, democratic government had been reestablished in Pakistan, election was held, and a lady executive (Benazir Bhutto) was chosen. The women movement appeared to lose its steam, and the enthusiasm and outrage that had driven it got diffused. In the next decade, women's empowerment organizations were built up. Another methodology developed: that of affecting government and policy makers through engagement and discourse. Women activists were currently individuals from advisory councils and working gatherings, and they composed arrangement papers and reports. Advocacy and support proceeded in this new structure. The enormous test from the mid-1990s (as in the past time before the 1980s, when ladies' privileges turned into an issue in themselves) has been to find battles for women's issues inside the more extensive battle, and to guarantee that women are remembered for basic leadership forms and decision making (Ahmed, 2004).

The women's movement in Pakistan in 1990s is marked by the proliferation of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs). According to Zia (2009), NGOs found more negotiating space and a less threatening state, and shifted their efforts towards sensitizing, negotiating, and influencing government policies. Women's groups established gender-specific NGOs to work on issues such as legal rights, adult literacy, or income-generation (Weiss, 1998). Despite the fact that the country returned to democracy, women's rights did not witness any drastic improvement. Particularly, the high hopes pinned on Benazir Bhutto, the Muslim world's first female leader, were not materialized. This less-than-expected achievement comes because, as Weiss (1993)

explains, most individual members of the provincial and national assemblies remained entrenched in patriarchal views of women's place in society. Hence, her attempts to repeal some of the laws enacted by Zia's martial law were met with severe opposition. However, some symbolic steps were taken during this time: one that the Bhutto's government established a separate Women's Ministry, highlighting women as a separate group that needed governments special support and attention. Contrary to Bhutto's government's accommodative behavior, Nawaz Sharif's two stints in government (1990-1993 and 1997-1999) were not conducive for women's rights. In fact, Sharif's government was dominated by religious right, while he himself was determined to complete the unfinished Islamization agenda of the General Zia (Saigol, 2016). Women were particularly wary of the proposed Shariat Bill (15<sup>th</sup> amendment) fearing it would decide upon their vice and virtue, and any autonomy or rights attained during other times would dissipate (*ibid*). Although the bill passed through the lower house but the government was dismissed by another martial law before it was passed in Senate. Zia, (2009) also agrees that during Sharif's second term women's rights groups were losing ground to conservatives and religious revivalists. NGOs came under renewed criticism, the government attempted to regulate their activism, blaming them of promoting, vulgarity, immorality and obscenity (Rashid 2006, as cited in Zia, 2009).

General Musharraf's regime (1999-2008) coincided with other important developments around the globe including the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001. These attacks and the resultant War on Terror (WoT) changed the world in many respects. The domination of NGOs in civil society including the women's movement not only continued but also expanded. Musharraf's rhetoric 'enlightened moderation' found the most support among liberals. These are the people that Zaidi (2008) calls 'lifestyle liberals.' Ironically, the first cabinet of Musharaf as the Chief Executive (before the politicization process started) included people from

civil society including prominent activists from the NGO sector who had struggled against the earlier military dictator. Notwithstanding, some of the measures taken toward women's right were indeed significant. Zia (2009) describes some of the achievements in this period that included: increase in reserved seats for women in parliament to 33 percent and establishment of a permanent National Commission on the Status of Women in 2000. One of the recommendations of the Commission, the Protection of Women Act 2006, has reformed the controversial Zina Ordinance, a central concern for the women's movement for the past twenty-five year (ibid). This is what Abbas (2008) refers to it by saying that many women's rights groups thought that he (Musharraf) was the best thing that had happened to the country in decades.

### **Current Movements (2018 – onward):**

The current movement was initiated by a handful of women in the port city of Karachi as Aurat Azadi March (Freedom March) on the occasion of International Women Day, 8 March 2018. They started with a simple initial demand, i.e., end to violence against women. But over the last few years it has expanded, both in coverage and demands. In fact, it marks a tectonic shift from the previous articulations of feminism in Pakistan (Saigol, 2019). Feminist movement in Pakistan has traditionally focused on issues pertaining to the public sphere, while ignoring those that relate to private lives. Despite the fact that women's bodies remained the focus for the most part of Pakistani state's Islamization efforts, the feminists have endeavored for legal reforms to enable women to have some basic rights in family. By doing so they have rarely mustered the courage to challenge the structure that controls and regulates issues such as sexuality and other choices. However, the current movements such as Aurat March and 'Me Too' Movement in the country goes beyond the traditional approach and it openly discusses issues such as sexuality.

This has encountered backlash not only from the religious-right group, but also many others including politicians, media, actors, and even from rights activists and feminists. More worryingly, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly passed a resolution condemning the Aurat March, saying the demands made for women empowerment were shameful and un-Islamic (Hayat, 2019). So long as the emphasis was on welfare and social issues - such as dowry, child marriage, women activists did not face severe backlash (Saigol and Chaudhary, 2020). The moment they challenge the state's social, economic and political structure or they advocate for rights in private sphere, patriarchies join hands in opposition.

## **Conclusion**

The women's movement in Pakistan is an ongoing struggle with a rich history. It continues to face significant challenges but also demonstrates resilience and a commitment to achieving gender equality. The movements vary in terms of specific historical trajectories as well as current ideas and practices from the western feminism. The paper concludes that women's movement is the outcome of long historic process and such process are mostly obstructed by multiple factors including the conservative forces. Besides, such challenges, there is always the possibility of change and development as clear from the gender reforms in Pakistan.

Citations available upon request for the above essay.

**Additional sources for students interested in, as Dr. Ali said, “amazing feminist work being conducted by women in Pakistan.”**

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**TW: SA, Gendercide, Femicide, Violence, Enslavement, War, War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, Trauma**

**Comfort Women during WWII: A Harrowing Tale of Forced Sexual Slavery**

**by Ellie Pearlman**

**Introduction**

“I lived, but I never healed.” These words, spoken by Lee Yong-soo, one of the last living Korean comfort women, capture not only the horrors of wartime sexual slavery but also the enduring legacy of trauma it left behind. During World War II, the Japanese Imperial Army systematically established a vast network of military brothels across Asia, forcibly recruiting an estimated 50,000 to 200,000 women, primarily from Korea, China, and the Philippines, into what would become one of the most brutal and concealed atrocities of the twentieth century (Tanaka, 2002; Yoshimi, 2000). These women, euphemistically called “comfort women,” endured repeated rape, physical violence, and social isolation under a state-sanctioned system designed to sustain military morale and suppress civilian unrest (Seifert, 1996; Hicks, 1995). In the following decades, their suffering was further compounded by familial, societal, and institutional silence, effectively erasing their stories from official histories and collective memory (Choi & Park, 2019; Mizuno, 2018).

Although most survivors are now in the final years of life or have already passed on, the trauma they experienced did not end with them. Instead, it has continued to be transmitted psychologically, culturally, and possibly even biologically, to their children and grandchildren. The generational trauma of WWII comfort women persists through a complex interplay of familial silence, societal erasure, and emerging epigenetic evidence, suggesting that the consequences of state-sanctioned sexual violence are not only psychological but may also be biologically encoded across generations (Brave Heart, 2011; Yehuda et al., 2015; Lee & Kim,

2021). This essay argues that the trauma endured by WWII comfort women has not only persisted through psychological silence and historical erasure but may also be biologically inherited—a legacy that demands both scientific attention and ethical reckoning.

### **Militarized Sexual Slavery**

The Japanese military's sexual enslavement of tens of thousands of Asian women during WWII was carried out with strategic precision, often involving deception, force, and logistical coordination between local collaborators and military officials. These women, later known as comfort women, were frequently deceived with promises of factory work or coerced through direct military abduction (Seifert, 1996; Yoshimi, 2000). Once taken, they were confined in so-called "comfort stations," where they endured repeated rape, physical violence, sexually transmitted infections, forced abortions, and near-complete social isolation (Tanaka, 2002; Hicks, 1995). Many were minors, some as young as 12 years old, and subjected to acts that amounted to war crimes under contemporary international law (Howard, 1995). Their lives were reduced to tools of morale management for Japanese soldiers, operating under the militarized logic that normalized and weaponized sexual violence (Tanaka, 2014). Unlike other forms of wartime trauma, the comfort women system involved a sustained, institutionalized form of gendered violence—a state-sanctioned policy of domination and erasure. The profound physical and emotional scars left on survivors are well documented, but less understood are the invisible legacies they passed down to their children and grandchildren—legacies shaped by silence, shame, and, as recent science suggests, possibly even changes to the body itself (Lee & Kim, 2021; Yehuda et al., 2015).

While the comfort women system inflicted horrific trauma on individual women, its design and execution were not random or incidental. It was a systematic, militarized institution

rooted in the goals of empire, control, and war strategy. The Japanese military established "comfort stations" not merely to satisfy soldiers' sexual desires but to serve strategic wartime objectives: to prevent venereal disease, reduce civilian rape (which could spark uprisings), and maintain troop morale (Seifert, 1996; Yoshimi, 2000). In doing so, the state formalized sexual violence into a mechanism of military logistics, treating women's bodies as consumable resources in the war machine.

This reframes the trauma from being a series of individual abuses to being part of a state-orchestrated apparatus of domination. The scale of the operation, the official military documentation, and the coordination between local authorities and the Japanese command structure reveal that sexual slavery was not a byproduct of war—it was a weapon of it (Tanaka, 2002; Howard, 1995). As historian Yuki Tanaka (2014) notes, the comfort women system blurred the lines between military infrastructure and gendered violence, institutionalizing misogyny in the service of imperial conquest. Understanding it this way is essential—not only to grasp the magnitude of harm but to recognize why the trauma has continued across generations. When trauma is part of a policy, not just a personal event, its legacy is deeply embedded in family histories, national narratives, and even, as new research suggests, the human genome (Sachs & Reuben, 2022; Lee & Kim, 2021). However, the trauma inflicted during wartime did not end with the cessation of violence. In the decades that followed, comfort women were subjected to a second form of violence—a collective silencing by society, the state, and even within their own families.

### **Silence and Societal Erasure**

In the decades following World War II, the trauma experienced by comfort women was compounded by a deafening silence from families, societies, and governments. Most survivors

returned to communities where speaking about their experiences invited stigma, shame, or outright disbelief. Many were labeled as “ruined” or dishonorable, leading them to conceal their pasts even from close relatives (Choi & Park, 2019; Soh, 2008). This culture of silence, often reinforced by patriarchal values and Confucian norms around female purity, ensured that much of their suffering remained invisible within their own families (Howard, 1995; Ueno, 2004).

At the state level, denial and distortion of history were pervasive. Japan’s postwar government refused for decades to acknowledge official responsibility, framing the comfort women system as either voluntary prostitution or an unfortunate byproduct of war (Mizuno, 2018; Yoshimi, 2000). Textbooks in Japan often omitted or sanitized references to sexual slavery, while public apologies, when issued, were frequently ambiguous and politically contested (Tanaka, 2014; Soh, 2008).

This marginalization had lasting effects. Survivors were denied not only compensation and justice but also the social legitimacy to mourn and heal. Their silence, often internalized and passed down, shaped family dynamics in complex ways, fueling unresolved grief, emotional repression, and psychological burdens carried by their children and grandchildren (Choi & Park, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2021). In this way, the trauma of the comfort women did not end with the war; it metastasized through generations, embedded in the unspoken spaces of memory and loss. This multilevel suppression of memory and denial of justice created conditions ripe for what psychologists now recognize as intergenerational trauma—a phenomenon in which unresolved historical pain is transferred to subsequent generations (Brave Heart, 2011; Yehuda et al., 2015).

### **Intergenerational Trauma and the Inheritance of Silence**

The trauma endured by comfort women did not end with the war. Instead, it echoed through generations through historical memory, family dynamics, emotional environments, and

cultural silence. This phenomenon—intergenerational trauma—has been observed across post-conflict and colonized populations, notably in the descendants of Holocaust survivors (Brave Heart, 2011; Yehuda et al., 2015). In the case of comfort women, survivors often suppressed their stories, silenced by conservative societal norms that equated sexual violence with personal dishonor (Choi & Park, 2019; Soh, 2008). This silence itself became an instrument of trauma transmission.

Rather than being passed down through explicit stories, the trauma was often inherited as emotional residue: patterns of fear, shame, and anxiety internalized by children and grandchildren (Lee & Kim, 2021; Choi & Park, 2019). The psychological burden of trauma without narrative explanation led many descendants to misinterpret their inherited distress as personal inadequacy. In these families, the legacy of suffering was felt in maternal distance, unexplained sadness, or an unspoken grief that permeated everyday life (Hirsch, 2012). Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory offers a framework for understanding this phenomenon. Postmemory describes how descendants of trauma survivors experience the emotional weight of a past they did not directly live through. For descendants of comfort women, this can be fragmented family memories, silent dinner tables, or inherited emotional burdens disconnected from lived experience. The trauma becomes ambient, transmitted not through words, but through silence, atmosphere, and relational absence.

This dynamic is particularly pronounced in families where survivors avoided disclosure out of fear of judgment or cultural shame (Choi & Park, 2019; Ueno, 2004). Yet even without a spoken narrative, descendants report carrying a heavy emotional load, often without understanding its origin. These responses include chronic anxiety, emotional withdrawal, identity confusion, and difficulties in intimacy, all of which mirror symptoms commonly associated with

post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Lee & Kim, 2021; Yehuda et al., 2015). In such cases, silence functions not as protection but as an intergenerational mechanism of unprocessed grief.

### **The Epigenetic Legacy of War**

While psychological frameworks such as postmemory explain how trauma reverberates emotionally across generations, recent research in epigenetics suggests it may also be transmitted biologically. Epigenetics refers to the modification of gene expression through mechanisms like DNA methylation and histone alteration, without changing the DNA sequence itself (Zannas & Binder, 2020). These modifications can be caused by extreme stressors such as war, famine, and systemic violence, and may be passed on to future generations. This insight challenges traditional views of trauma as merely emotional or mental, suggesting that historical atrocities, such as the comfort women system, could leave biological traces that endure long after the original acts of violence (Sachs & Reuben, 2022).

A landmark study by Yehuda et al. (2015) on Holocaust survivors and their descendants found altered methylation of the NR3C1 gene, which regulates stress hormone levels. These biological changes indicated an inherited predisposition toward heightened stress responses—essentially a biological imprint of historical trauma. This work provides empirical evidence that trauma can alter gene expression and that such alterations may be inherited.

Though large-scale epigenetic studies have not yet been conducted on descendants of comfort women, early psychological assessments suggest similar patterns of inherited distress. Lee and Kim (2021) found elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and dissociation among grandchildren of Korean survivors, even when they had no direct exposure to wartime violence. These findings support the possibility of biological transmission, particularly given the parallels with Holocaust-related epigenetic data (Yehuda et al., 2015; Zannas & Binder, 2020).

Scholars like Sachs and Reuben (2022) have emphasized the human rights implications of this research. If trauma is biologically encoded, the harms of sexual slavery are not confined to the original generation—they become intergenerational injuries that challenge existing legal frameworks for reparations and accountability. For comfort women whose stories were historically dismissed or minimized, epigenetics offers a new and scientifically grounded form of validation.

Integrating biological research into trauma studies doesn't replace psychological narratives; it enhances them. It transforms inherited trauma from an abstract, anecdotal experience into a measurable phenomenon with ethical, legal, and reparative implications (Sachs & Reuben, 2022). Although more work is needed, particularly in East Asian survivor populations, the foundational science already supports a broader claim: that trauma does not die with its victims—it mutates, endures, and demands recognition.

### **Politics of Denial**

The lack of such studies is not due to irrelevance, but rather to a combination of factors: limited access to survivor families, lingering cultural stigma, and the absence of political and institutional support for in-depth investigation. Yet the scientific justification for pursuing this line of inquiry is compelling. If epigenetic alterations are found in this population, it would not only affirm survivor narratives that have long been dismissed as anecdotal or exaggerated but also provide a biological basis for claims of ongoing harm, an essential step toward achieving reparative justice. It would also reposition the comfort women issue as a historical tragedy and a living, generational wound that continues to shape identity, health, and memory. As Lee and Kim (2021) argue, integrating epigenetics into trauma research can transform our understanding of the past and our present-day responsibilities. The implications of such research go beyond scientific

curiosity—they pose urgent questions of justice. If trauma is biologically inherited, the moral and legal case for reparation extends to the children and grandchildren of survivors (Sachs & Reuben, 2022).

The question of justice for former comfort women has long been entangled in political controversy and moral ambiguity, particularly regarding Japan's official acknowledgment and compensation efforts. In 1993, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono issued what became known as the Kono Statement, an admission that the Japanese military was “directly or indirectly involved” in establishing and managing comfort stations. While the statement marked a rare moment of official recognition, it was met with backlash from conservative factions in Japan who pressured subsequent administrations to downplay or revise it (Mizuno, 2018). Just two years later, the creation of the Asian Women’s Fund in 1995—a government-backed but privately funded compensation initiative—further complicated the situation. Because the compensation was not paid directly by the Japanese state but through civilian donations, many survivors saw it as a symbolic gesture lacking proper accountability, and several refused to accept the funds (Tanaka, 2014).

In recent years, as public memory continues to clash with historical denial, the concept of intergenerational trauma has added a new dimension to these justice debates. If trauma can be shown to persist biologically, as emerging epigenetic research suggests, then the argument for reparation extends beyond the original victims to their descendants, who continue to suffer the psychological, social, and possibly physiological consequences of wartime violence (Zannas & Binder, 2020). This complicates the legal notion that responsibility ends when survivors die or accept compensation. Instead, it reframes justice as historical redress and a living ethical obligation. The comfort women system may have been decades in the past, but its impacts

remain embodied in families today, making denial not only a historical inaccuracy but an act of ongoing harm. Yet justice is not only a legal matter; it also involves memory and recognition. When governments deny or distort the truth, they obstruct healing, compounding the pain of survivors and their descendants alike (Choi & Park, 2019).

Denial is not simply the absence of recognition—it is a continuation of violence in the form of erasure. For survivors of the comfort women system and their descendants, ongoing denial by state actors has reinforced trauma by invalidating their experiences and obstructing healing. As Mizuno (2018) argues, Japan's official reluctance to fully acknowledge its wartime sexual slavery system has fueled a political culture of revisionism that actively suppresses open discourse. This denial, often reflected in sanitized school textbooks and public statements, not only hinders historical accountability but also disrupts processes of mourning and remembrance for survivors and their families. In contrast, silence is not always imposed; sometimes, it is internalized. As Tanaka (2014) notes, many comfort women chose silence as a survival strategy in the face of overwhelming shame and stigma. But when this silence becomes multigenerational, it creates a vacuum where memory should be—a space filled instead with inherited anxiety, grief, and confusion.

### **Remembrance and Resistance**

Against this silence, various grassroots efforts have emerged to reclaim narrative agency and facilitate collective healing. Memorials such as the Statue of Peace in Seoul and other cities have become powerful symbols of resistance and dignity, forcing the public to confront uncomfortable truths (Choe, 2021). Oral history projects, often led by feminist and transnational organizations, have also provided vital platforms for survivors to speak on their own terms, transforming individual stories into collective testimony (Choi & Park, 2019). These initiatives

do more than preserve memory; they disrupt denial and offer descendants a framework through which to understand their inherited pain. International advocacy, including resolutions passed by the U.S. Congress and the United Nations, further amplifies the call for historical recognition and justice (Mizuno, 2018).

Remembrance, in this sense, is not just an act of honoring the past—it is a necessary intervention in the present, one that challenges the ongoing harm of erasure and creates the possibility of generational repair. As Hirsch (2012) argues, memory work in trauma-affected communities serves as both a psychological and political act, helping descendants reclaim narratives lost to silence, stigma, and denial.

## Conclusion

The trauma endured by comfort women during World War II did not end with the war's close or even with the survivors' lives. It has persisted—encoded in silence, embedded in memory, and, increasingly, suspected in biology. Through the lenses of intergenerational trauma and epigenetics, we now understand that violence can ripple far beyond its immediate moment, affecting the psychological and physiological health of those born decades later (Yehuda et al., 2015; Zannas & Binder, 2020). These insights challenge narrow, time-bound definitions of justice and demand that we reckon with the enduring legacies of historical violence (Brave Heart, 2011; Sachs & Reuben, 2022).

To ignore this evidence is to accept denial as a substitute for accountability. But where governments have failed to fully acknowledge and redress the past, descendants, activists, and scholars have stepped forward to reclaim the narrative and demand recognition—not just of a historical atrocity, but of a living, inherited burden (Mizuno, 2018; Tanaka, 2014). The comfort

women system must be understood not as a closed chapter of history, but as an open wound that continues to shape lives.

As science deepens our understanding of inherited trauma, the ethical imperative becomes clear: true justice must address what was done and what endures. Acknowledging the comfort women's legacy is not merely an act of historical truth but a commitment to intergenerational healing, memory, and moral responsibility (Lee & Kim, 2021; Hirsch, 2012).

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## **Rethinking Japanese Women's Fight Towards Gender Equality Under the New Constitution Through the Lens of the Family System**

**by Rija Qureshi**

### **Introduction**

The incorporation of gender equality into the Japanese Constitution of 1947 by Western diplomats showcased the divergence in the understanding of this concept between Western and Japanese perspectives. Gender equality occurs when people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and prospects. The impact of gender inequality is far-reaching, affecting everyone. Japan, like many other countries, has a history of limited acceptance and acknowledgement of women's rights. While it is true that a significant majority of women in Japan did not actively engage in the pursuit of gender equality, it is important to note that Japanese women were not oblivious to their societal standing, and many were actively striving to bring about change.<sup>1</sup> Considering the concept and challenges of gender equality itself is crucial to comprehending why the Western ideal of gender equality does not completely function in postwar Japanese society. Gender equality concerns in any country extend beyond the realms of feminism and human rights, encompassing the crucial determination of economic trajectory and serving as an integral aspect of a nation's existence.<sup>2</sup> That is especially true when a large majority of a nation's population does not have equal rights. It is crucial to investigate and propose innovative strategies for authorities and business in various countries to better use women in

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<sup>1</sup> "Japanese Women Seek Vote," *An Equal Rights*, Vol. 15, No. 41, November 16, 1929, 5. District of Columbia: National Woman's Party, US, 1929.

<sup>2</sup> Beate Sirota Gordon, Susan J. Pharr, Barbara Molony, and Sally Hastings, "Celebrating Women's Rights in the Japanese Constitution." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, no. 14 (1998), 81.

public sectors. Despite great worldwide advances toward promoting gender equality, women and girls continue to experience severe discrimination in all parts of the world.

Historically, women led suffrage movements globally have fought for gender equality and women's rights and Japan is no exception. Established in 1924, Fusen Kakutoku Domei was a Japanese women's rights organization with their main mission being advocating for the passage of women's suffrage.<sup>3</sup> However, because they were a small minority, the organization was not very successful in promoting voting rights for women. Nonetheless, gender equality was legislatively recognized through the additions of article 14 and 24 to the Japanese's Constitution. The Japanese Constitution was co-written by the occupied Japanese government and the American administration during a nine-month period.<sup>4</sup> American ideals of democracy were also written into the new Constitution as it revised the Emperor System. These included a parliamentary system of government, bringing more liberalism to Japanese society. However, the progressive words in Article 14 and 24 were written by Beate Sirota Gordon, a 22-year-old American woman and the sole woman involved in the formulation of the new Constitution.<sup>5</sup> Article 14 was crucial in recognizing gender equality legislatively. "All of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Article 24 established equal rights for spouses in the Constitution. "Marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual cooperation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis.

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<sup>3</sup> Ryoko Kurihara, "The Japanese Woman Suffrage Movement." *Feminist Issues* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1991), 81.

<sup>4</sup> Beate Sirota Gordon, "Celebrating Women's Rights," 65.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>6</sup> "The Constitution of Japan," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet.

With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes.”<sup>7</sup> Although Article 24 itself did not grant women suffrage, on December 17, 1945, “The essential equality of the sexes” phrase of the article paved the way for Japan’s General Election Law to be updated, giving women suffrage for the first time in the country’s history. The enforcement of the Constitution necessitated substantial legislative labor, both in the form of modifications to existing legislation and new pieces of legislation. This was especially true in family law, as the family structure was clearly incompatible with “individual rights in general and gender equality,” and was not taken into account by the western diplomats.<sup>8</sup>

Prior to World War II, the way that Japanese society was structured was with the nation and governments well-being prioritized over the individual citizens. Citizens were placed into roles at the local and national level that would benefit the nation as a whole with very small concessions to civil rights.<sup>9</sup> This also translated into family dynamics with the preservation of the household being prioritized over the individual members in the family. These cultural and societal values manifested in the family system, where each member had an important role to play for the longevity of the household.<sup>10</sup> The family is still a fundamental institution in Japanese society, and familial ties dictate good social and political conduct. The eldest son was usually the head of the household, with the other members of the family subservient to him.<sup>11</sup> For women,

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<sup>7</sup> “The Constitution of Japan.”

<sup>8</sup> Anette Marfording, “Gender Equality under the Japanese Constitution.” *Verfassung Und Recht in Übersee / Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* 29, no. 3 (1996), 330.

<sup>9</sup> Hiroko Sekiguchi, “1. The Patriarchal Family Paradigm in Eighth-Century Japan.” (2019), 36.

<sup>10</sup> Sekiguchi, “Patriarchal Family,” 27.

<sup>11</sup> Sekiguchi, “Patriarchal Family,” 28.

restraint, respect, organization, decorum, virginity, and modesty were ingrained from an early age. Their main role in a family was that of a wife, and motherhood should have been their maximum aspiration.<sup>12</sup> Children were expected to respect their elders; ancestors were revered; the lineage was patrilineal. These traditions developed from the Chinese Confucian family system and took on Japanese cultural ideology during the Tokugawa and Meiji period. Even after WWII, the family system remained intact and an integral part of Japanese society. Therefore, when it came to the provision of gender equality, marital rights, and women's suffrage in the new Constitution, the western ideology behind that became a main point of contention as Japanese values were not taken into consideration. The Constitution legalized gender equality but did not foresee how it would be implemented and enforced in a society with a strict family system.

This paper aims at contributing to the historiography of gender equality in Japan by highlighting the postwar expansion of women's rights and suffrage in Japan, as well as the lack of representation of the women that these provisions were intended to help. Despite the progressive stance on gender equality superimposed upon the Japanese constitution by western diplomats, these ideas failed to fully work in Japan from a cultural and societal level. This paper will look at the gender distinction of women in prewar Japan, as well as the shift towards a more democratic gender politics legislatively in post war Japan through the examination of Articles 14 and 24. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that this ideology of gender equality informed from a western perspective proved detrimental for Japanese women socially and culturally in their fight toward equality. However, stating that gender equality is a western concept overlooks the principles and actions of the women's movement in Japan and in other nations, as well as their governments' promises of gender equality. Finally, this essay argues that because gender equality

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<sup>12</sup> Carmen Blacker, "Fukuzawa Yukichi on Family Relationships." *Monumenta Nipponica* 14, no. 1/2 (1958), 46.

was legislatively written into the Japanese Constitution from a western perspective, it ignored the sociocultural factors that hindered its full application.

To better inform this argument, the use of scholarly peer-reviewed sources alongside primary sources is essential. Many scholars have done intensive research and written papers on gender equality in post-war Japan. This paper adds to the discourse on Japanese gender equality that is presented by the following scholars by examining it through the lens of the family system. Scholars studying gender equality in contemporary Japan, such as Annette Marfording, have argued how formal gender equality was turned into substantial equality.<sup>13</sup> Because gender equality was recognized Constitutionally, many felt that the problem of gender equality was solved. She examines education, employment, and family law from a historical, legal, political, economic, and cultural standpoint. Her explanation of people still deferring to the strict hierarchical family system even in civil court matters like divorce, demonstrates that legislation on its own, had little impact on social reality.<sup>14</sup> Since gender equality was Constitutionally recognized, it was the state's responsibility to enforce it. However, due to the family system being integral socially and culturally, this makes that difficult. Lee Michelle Cummings further dives into the public and private sectors in regard to work and the discrimination women faced in the workforce despite the legal presence of gender equality. She ultimately concludes that the major problem in the Japanese workforce was, and in many ways still is the wage gap and the fact that women continue to be barred from certain fields.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Marfording, "Gender Equality under Constitution," 324.

<sup>14</sup> Marfording, "Gender Equality under Constitution," 343.

<sup>15</sup> Lee Michelle Cummings, "A Case Study: Gender Equality in The Workplace in Post-War Japan and its Global Implications." Senior Projects Spring 2018, 46.

As mentioned previously, following the end of the war, the family system was still important in Japanese society, however, some felt it was time to break away from it. Vera Mackie argues that the strict family system of the pre-war eras was changing to fit with the post war era's definition of feminism. Many women did not want to follow the old system because they wanted more rights. She investigates feminist ideology in postwar Japan and the lack of female recognition in society, despite their citizenship and the new Constitution granting them equality.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, Ryoko Kurihara's piece is mainly about Ichikawa Fusae and the Fusen Kakutoku Domei from 1931-1940.<sup>17</sup> Her work contains insights such as the objectives of the league to improve women's legal status in Japan; to achieve women's suffrage; to develop women's policies in areas such as personal lives, education, and labors; and to educate Japanese women about democracy and citizenship.<sup>18</sup>

Like any historical topic dealing with women there are not many primary sources available. The main primary sources for this paper are Articles 14 and 24 of the 1947 Constitution. Additionally, scholarly writings during the time serve as important text in informing about women's experiences with pre and postwar equality. Memoires written by women after the establishment of gender equality are aslo fundamental sources. Additionally the Meiji Constitution of 1868 serves as an important historical comparison with the current Constitution of Japan; specifically, Article 5 of the Meiji Constitution will be compared to Articles 14 and 24 of the postwar Constitution. This paper also makes use of a post-war film directed by one of the few female directors of the 1950s, Tanaka Kunio.

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<sup>16</sup> Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment, and Sexuality (Contemporary Japanese Society)*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Kurihara, "Japanese Woman Suffrage Movement," 81.

<sup>18</sup> Kurihara, "Japanese Woman Suffrage Movement," 92.

## Ancient Japan and Confucianism Ideology

Understanding of women's roles and the family system that informed concepts of gender distinction throughout Japanese history can be traced back to the importation of Confucian ideology from China in the ancient period. The delegation of women to a low status in society can be traced as far back as the *Taihō Code* that came about Japan in the 8th century.<sup>19</sup> Although this was due to the patriarchal system enforced by Confucian ideals of filiality, this cemented women's place as lesser than men. The civil and penal code, also based on Chinese models of governance, brought drastic changes such as the restructuring of the central and provincial administration as well as the transformation of the family system based on Chinese models.<sup>20</sup> As a defining moment in the early history of Japanese women, through these new legal structures and protocols, a patriarchal social order was created in the form of a patrilineal family system.

This familial system delegated each member to a specific position which was intended to preserve the household.<sup>21</sup> The household was made up of parental grandparents/elders, the son and his wife, and their offspring, essentially extended nuclear households. This strict family system stripped people of individual identity in favor of a functioning cohesive unit to the point that individual identity could not be separated from the identity of one's family. Despite it taking several centuries for this new system to become firmly entrenched in Japanese social institutions, it backed up the Confucian principle that women are inferior beings.<sup>22</sup> This was due to the fact that men and women were assigned to gendered spheres. Men were attached to the public sphere of employment, whilst women were tied to the sphere of family and domesticity. Men and

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<sup>19</sup> Sekiguchi, "Patriarchal Family," 28.

<sup>20</sup> Sekiguchi, "Patriarchal Family," 37.

<sup>21</sup> Gail Lee Bernstein, *Recreating Japanese Women: 1600-1945*. Berkeley u.a.: Univ. of California Press, 1991, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Mori Ichiu and 森一雨, "Nichiren's View of Women." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 30, no. 3/4 (2003): 279.

women were viewed as functioning in separate but interconnected domains in this regard.<sup>23</sup>

Women were viewed as inferior since they could not be public figures. This cemented women's new place in society as they were subjugated to lesser positions. Women faced discrimination especially when it came to the subject of marriage and divorce.

The Confucian notion of a cosmic order set the template for the social order underpinning this drastic reworking of family and other social connections. According to classical Confucian thought, the world is divided into two paralleled halves, the country and the family. Confucius' principles rarely ever deal with individual redemption or liberties, they are predominately centered around society's overall well-being.<sup>24</sup> It emphasizes values like civility, humility, obedience, reverence, loyalty, collective commitment, striving for public good, social peace, and compassion. The administrative codes created a hierarchical order of subservient relationships based on filial piety, a well-ordered family, a well-ordered state, and a well-ordered world.<sup>25</sup> "The three bonds distinguish primary functional pairings-those between ruler and minister, father and son, and husband and wife."<sup>26</sup> This Chinese Neo-Confucian ideology also encapsulated the five ordinances of major human relationships, "ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, friend and friend. Only in the friend and friend relationship were the participants equal, all the others required respect and obedience on the part of the subordinates to the superiors."<sup>27</sup>

The country is basically an extension upon the familial units so in turn the family units each individually are a representation of the country. Family necessitates absolute fidelity to

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<sup>23</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Blacker, "Fukuzawa Yukichi," 47.

<sup>25</sup> Sekiguchi, "Patriarchal Family," 29.

<sup>26</sup> Sekiguchi, "Patriarchal Family," 27.

<sup>27</sup> Marfording, "Gender Equality under Constitution," 325.

function. These responsibilities of loyalty and absolute fidelity are based on the notion that those who have more power will bestow goodwill and blessings to those below them for loyalty. In return, the recipient is obligated to offer the lord a higher level of appreciation in response to his lord's kindness.<sup>28</sup> This logic can also be applied to the family system with lower members of the family demonstrating their appreciation via devotion. As this patriarchal system was refined it gradually replaced previous matriarchal ones from the proto-historical era. This system's complete integration into Japanese society can be seen in the Tokugawa period (1603-1868).

### **Tokugawa Period**

The Tokugawa shogunate was a military administration commanded by the strongest warriors of the military caste known as samurai. These warriors lived to protect their clans, which they mainly did through civil means. Samurai followed the bushido code, “the way of the warrior,” which was inspired from Confucian principles about loyalty and responsibility.<sup>29</sup> This expanded outside of the samurai caste and throughout Japanese culture.<sup>30</sup> This particular arrangement gave rise to *yometori* (taking a wife) marriage, which is the incorporation of a daughter-in-law into the husband’s family after marriage.<sup>31</sup> Marriage defined a woman’s life. “The establishment of the...*yometori* marriage, has been considered in historical models as a hierarchical system of -patrilineal hegemony, in which the woman's role is subordinate.”<sup>32</sup> Women, especially those in the samurai and courtier segments of society, were excluded from the economic life of society since authority in this culture was military.<sup>33</sup> Women could no

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<sup>28</sup> Wakita Haruko and David P. Phillips, “Women and the Creation of the ‘Ie’ in Japan: An Overview from the Medieval Period to the Present.” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal. English Supplement*, no. 4 (1993), 87.

<sup>29</sup> Bernstein, *Recreating Japanese Women*, 172.

<sup>30</sup> Sekiguchi, “Patriarchal Family,” 35.

<sup>31</sup> Haruko, “Women and the Creation of the ‘Ie’,” 83.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>33</sup> Bernstein, *Recreating Japanese Women*, 153.

longer own land; succession was passed down through the husband's family. As a result, women became completely reliant on their spouse and his family. The ideals of feminine virtue at this time were service and discretion, as women were expected to present themselves in a quiet manner.<sup>33</sup> From birth, women were educated to follow the three obediences based on Confucian teaching, "1. A woman should first obey her parents. 2. She should then obey her husband. 3. In old age, she should obey her son."<sup>34</sup> Tokugawa Japan's education of young girls was intended to instill in them the values of subservience and self-control.<sup>35</sup>

Women were also taught marriage etiquette, with the main presentation of one's self in front of her spouse being one of obedience. Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714), was a Neo-Confucian scholar at the time.<sup>36</sup> Among his most famous works is *Onna daigaku* or Greater Learning for Women that taught women how to behave according to Confucian principles. In this work, he states "A woman has no particular lord. She must look to her husband as her lord, and must serve him with all worship and reverence, not despising or thinking lightly of him," highlights the idea of women needing guidance from men.<sup>37</sup> Ekken himself served the daimyo of Fukuoka domain and that was where his loyalty laid. However, his works taught women that their loyalty was to their husband, who they should serve. He furthered this by expanding that their servitude and loyalty to their husband translated indirectly into their loyalty to the lord.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the wife was regarded as a retainer serving her husband who in turn would serve the feudal lord. She was

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<sup>34</sup> Ichiu, "Nichiren's View of Women," 282.

<sup>35</sup> Imai Yasuko and Lili Iriye Selden, "The Emergence of the Japanese 'Shufu': Why a 'Shufu' Is More Than a 'Housewife,'" *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, no. 6 (1994), 61.

<sup>36</sup> Kaibara Ekken, "EXCERPTS FROM THE GREAT LEARNING FOR WOMEN (ONNA DAIGAKU)," Asia for Educators | Columbia University (Columbia University), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Ekken, "ONNA DAIGAKU," 2.

expected to be as prepared and devoted to his service as he was to his master.<sup>39</sup> Marriage was a career for women that required submission and sacrifice of oneself for the sake of loyalty and familial devotion in a hierarchical structure that eventually encompassed the entire country. In order to do that, women were instructed to stay virtuous by not succumbing to desire, to never be inconvenient to others, and never challenge the leadership of her seniors.<sup>40</sup>

Women's roles entailed them being confined to the home, with their primary responsibilities being in childbearing and household management, "A woman's role as mother helped to secure her social status within the household."<sup>41</sup> Because women could not hold high status, they would use the position of the husband in his family to gain power. For example, if she was the wife of the oldest son of the household, then she would have authority over the wives of the younger sons and also the servants.<sup>42</sup> However, the wife's position in the household could become vulnerable through the addition of a concubine.

Men often ruled their families using a polygamous system, with one wife who was at their social standing and several concubines of lower status.<sup>43</sup> Due to women of various social standing living in the same household, this marital practice created tensions between wives and concubines. To sustain the Confucian patriarchal society's concubinage system, males expected that wives be docile, but they also required concubines to be subordinate to wives in order to maintain hierarchy and family order.<sup>44</sup> When such tensions arose, wives were frequently punished for being jealous and violent toward concubines, despite husbands being responsible

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<sup>39</sup> Sekiguchi, "Patriarchal Family," 35.

<sup>40</sup> Ekken, "ONNA DAIGAKU," 1.

<sup>41</sup> Haruko, "Women and the Creation of the 'Ie,'" 83.

<sup>42</sup> Haruko, "Women and the Creation of the 'Ie,'" 87.

<sup>43</sup> Jisoo M Kim, "From Jealousy to Violence: Marriage, Family, and Confucian Patriarchy in Fifteenth-Century Korea." *Acta Koreana* 20, no. 1 (2017), 91.

<sup>44</sup> Kim, "Confucian Patriarchy." 105.

for upsetting the family balance. Even though it was the husbands who incited the jealousy of their wives', "the state demanded the patriarch to repress his wife's feelings to maintain harmony in the family."<sup>45</sup> In all aspects of these material relationships, the husbands had full control over their wives' and concubines' to the point where they could dictate pregnancies and had ownership of the libido of the women in their home.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, wives were expected to have boys who would inherit their family's name, status, authority, and assets. Women were frequently seen as wombs controlled by their husbands in order to create male heirs instead of as an individual.<sup>47</sup> While for concubines, there was no advantage in having a son because, "a concubine's son was not able to enjoy the right to continue the family line, to receive an equal share of inheritance, or to take the civil service examination."<sup>48</sup>

Women were important players in power struggles between families seeking to improve their riches, power, and position through alliances with other families based on marriage. The marital relationship and household dynamics essentially developed to resemble the country's feudal system. Husband and wife -relationships evolved into that of lord and servant. As a result, perfect subordination to the husband was expected, and this became the ultimate attribute of the wife.<sup>49</sup> This led to instability of the woman's place in the household. Her self-worth as an individual and wife was determined by her work contribution to the home and her capacity to have children. As a result, a physically ill or infertile woman may be divorced and returned to her parents.<sup>50</sup> The organization of society under such rigid rules confined women's opportunities

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<sup>45</sup> Kim, "Confucian Patriarchy." 106.

<sup>46</sup> Haruko, "Women and the Creation of the 'Ie,'" 94.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>48</sup> Kim, "Confucian Patriarchy." 105.

<sup>49</sup> Ekken, "ONNA DAIGAKU," 2.

<sup>50</sup> Kim, "Confucian Patriarchy." 106.

to the family system.<sup>51</sup> They didn't have any other alternatives. Their life's value and mission were predetermined without their input.

## Meiji Period

Following the Tokugawa era, the Meiji era (1868-1912) highlighted Japan's transition from a secluded feudal nation under risk of invasion by foreign governments to a modernized and industrial nation state.<sup>52</sup> After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan's leaders attempted to draft a Constitution which is significant as it was Japan's first Constitution and would last almost a century until it would ultimately be replaced after the end of World War II. The Constitution excluded women from voting.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, during this time a modernization of the family system emerged, which was ultimately also replaced after the end of World War II.

This Japanese family system, which was based on pre-Meiji understandings, is referred to as the *ie* system [household, family]. It is usually interpreted as the word for "family," yet this is insufficient as it means "home in relation to family."<sup>54</sup> Many aspects of the *ie* system remained the same from the Tokugawa period.<sup>55</sup> This household unit comprises all current lineal descendants, deceased forebears, and unborn descendants.<sup>56</sup> The authority of the head of household, the patriarch, was not limited to the control over women and children under this structure, but extended to all individuals who lived in and were members of the household, including the patriarch's siblings. A patriarch was often replaced by a new patriarch, generally the oldest son, which indicated that everybody in the home, not only the son's wife, but also his

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<sup>51</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 22.

<sup>53</sup> "The Constitution of the Empire of Japan (1889)," 1889 Japanese constitution. Harvard University.

<sup>54</sup> Haruko, "Women and the Creation of the 'Ie,'" 87.

<sup>55</sup> Haruko, "Women and the Creation of the 'Ie,'" 84.

<sup>56</sup> Sekiguchi, "Patriarchal Family," 37.

brothers and sisters, bowed to that eldest son.<sup>57</sup> Sisters typically stayed in their brother's household until they married into their husband's household. The head had complete control over all affairs impacting all individuals. The parental bond with the children was extremely important to this system. This took precedence over all other connections, even marriage. - This was particularly true of the father-son relationship, as daughters when they grew up, had to depart and join another family.<sup>58</sup> The goal of marriage was to benefit the *ie* and the husband's lineage.

Furthermore, similarly to the Tokugawa In principle, *yometori* marriage did not include the uniting of a man and a woman, but instead it indicated the woman leaving her own family for her husband's. It is often the husband's house or family that is visited, never the wife's.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the wife's primary bond is broken with her birth family and reconstructed with her marital family where her loyalty now lies.<sup>60</sup> Similar to Tokugawa-era marriage, if the woman did not fulfill such expectations, she may be returned to her original home. Despite divorce being legal, it was heavily frowned upon, especially by the elites. Divorced women, in many cases, brought dishonor upon themselves and their original households.<sup>61</sup> The *ie* structure was the cornerstone of society, because it was in the home that people first learned the exact norms of respect that regulated social behavior.<sup>62</sup> The *ie* system's significance was heightened by its relationship with political ideology that saw Japan as a family state ruled by a divine emperor to whom people pledged unconditional allegiance to.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bernstein, *Recreating Japanese Women*, 153.

<sup>58</sup> Bernstein, *Recreating Japanese Women*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Haruko, "Women and the Creation of the 'Ie,'" 87.

<sup>61</sup> Blacker, "Fukuzawa Yukichi," 53.

<sup>62</sup> Marfording, "Gender Equality under Constitution," 326.

<sup>63</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 23.

One of the leading critics of the Meiji period and the founder of Keio University, Fukuzawa Yukichi, was a well-known educator and promoter of Western thought. His works influenced the early leaders of Japan's women's liberation movement.<sup>64</sup> Although the foundations of feminism in Japan can be traced back to antiquity, it was not until the Meiji period, when western philosophy was introduced to Japan and the addition of Fukuzawa's work, that the movement gained traction. Fukuzawa envisioned an equal society in which men and women would be treated equally.<sup>65</sup> His work *Danjo kosairon*, “The New Greater Learning for Women,” was written in 1887 and showed his longing for Japanese women to be liberated from the constraints of the Confucian family order: “Both men and women are human beings living between Heaven and Earth, and there is no reason to suppose that one is more important than the other.”<sup>66</sup> He viewed women’s lower status as unacceptable, especially when it came down to material relations.

He was a strong champion of monogamy and felt the system that allowed married men to keep concubines was abhorrent as he believed that marriage was an equal partnership between husband and wife. “If a man has the right to keep two women, there can be no reason why a woman should not possess two men...Hence for one man to marry two or three women is a flagrant violation of nature (tenria). Such men are no better than birds or beasts.”<sup>67</sup> While the state and scholars like Ekken instructed women to suppress their emotions, especially those of jealousy, Fukuzawa denounced systems that allowed such emotions to even arise. He sympathized with the tragedy of women's lives being limited to marriage, an institution that

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<sup>64</sup> Blacker, “Fukuzawa Yukichi,” 60.

<sup>65</sup> Nishikawa Shunsaku, “Fukuzawa Yukichi - Ibe.unesco.org” (UNESCO: International Bureau of Education, 2000), 8.

<sup>66</sup> Blacker, “Fukuzawa Yukichi,” 48.

<sup>67</sup> Blacker, “Fukuzawa Yukichi,” 49.

provided no equality between the couple and gave women no emotional outlet. His beliefs directly conflicted with Ekken's view of the submissive, loyal, and obedient woman. Fukuzawa believed that since women were not given much agency or responsibility in public society, they were hindered in obtaining full intellectual prowess and were not developing a sense of self identity and maturity by being submissive.<sup>68</sup>

Fukuzawa also advocated for western thinking in Japan especially in regards to gender equality. He promoted western philosophy that centered around liberation and believed that children's traditional Japanese education mixed with western ideology can lead to personal independence, "freedom and independence refer not only to the private self, but to the nation as well."<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, he took it upon himself to educate young women on his progressive ideas about gender equality.<sup>70</sup> Although this resulted in an increase in educational opportunities for women, the social standing of Japanese women remained unchanged. Additionally, the Japanese feminist movement used his teachings and ideas to fight for gender equality. When the movement was formally organized into the Fusen Kakutoku Domei in 1924, despite the main goal of achieving women's suffrage rights, it also championed and brought up the subject of liberation of both genders.<sup>71</sup> This caveat was necessary as they realized that championing a cause directly related to the liberation of all women was not going to be successful on its own.<sup>72</sup>

### **Japanese Family System In Post War Japan**

Nonetheless, despite western ideology seeping into Japanese society at the time and the effort for suffrage by the Fusen Kakutoku Domei, socio-political factors of the Japanese family

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<sup>68</sup> Shunsaku, "Fukuzawa Yukichi," 9.

<sup>69</sup> Shunsaku, "Fukuzawa Yukichi," 5.

<sup>70</sup> Shunsaku, "Fukuzawa Yukichi," 4.

<sup>71</sup> Kurihara, "Japanese Woman Suffrage Movement," 85.

<sup>72</sup> Kurihara, "Japanese Woman Suffrage Movement," 86.

system remained, hindering the advancement and shifting of women's roles in Japanese society. As mentioned previously the fight for equality is not a new concept in Japan, women since the Meiji period have been fighting for it. Like in the west, Japanese women were fighting for suffrage and better education for women, but they were also fighting for an improvement in the Japanese family system. America has a similar concept in the nuclear family which is a family unit composed of a married couple and their dependent children and promotes a heteronormative world.<sup>73</sup> Heteronormativity refers to a world view that encourages heterosexuality as the natural or desirable sexual orientation. The origins of the nuclear family can be traced back to the 1920s but unlike the nuclear family, the Japanese family system dates back centuries and is an inherent part of Japanese politics, economy, and society. As mentioned previously, the Japanese family system was responsible for not only defining gender roles but also people's place in society.

Such a prevalent system cannot be easily dismantled. In fact, during the Meiji period, the proposed Civil Code of 1898 sparked great debate due to its parts involving the family.<sup>74</sup> This included specifications that parties were to marry of their own free will, that parental approval to a marriage between adults was optional, both of which undermined the family order in other ways. Under the pre-existing family or *ie* system, the family was a patriarchal organization in which the head of the family (a position inherited by the eldest son) held total power and the family members' first responsibility was to obey him.<sup>75</sup> Women's political subjugation in Japanese culture has been so deeply embedded in the family dynamics and gender roles that it is difficult to separate gender equality and female independence from the dismantling of the whole structure.

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<sup>73</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 112.

<sup>74</sup> Marfording, "Gender Equality under Constitution," 326.

<sup>75</sup> Sekiguchi, "Patriarchal Family," 30.

With the end of the war understandings of marriage, family, and the man-woman bond were all radically redefined. Articles 14 and 24 of the Constitution include the most important clauses as they legalize gender equality. The vital changes to the law that affected women were the establishment of full equality of women and men, women suffrage, and the requirement that marriage be based on the free consent of both parties.<sup>76</sup> However, Ichikawa Fusae a prominent figure of the women's movement in Japan in 1925, in an article, "The Position of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Women's Movement," she wrote that, "the real mission of the women's movement was the so-called women's rights movement," emphasizing that, "women's political equality, she wrote that she did not think woman suffrage would solve everything, but could produce many positive by-products."<sup>77</sup> Although the Constitution was effective in establishing gender equality through legislation, it was not successful in ensuring that it was carried out socially and culturally. As it will be later pointed out, these legal provisions also had shortcomings.

Despite these advancements of rights, many women were still cautious with the suffrage they were granted. Yoshitake, for example, ensured that her mom would go to the polls because she understood that "if you do not exercise this important right, then the status of women is likely to revert to what it was in the prewar period."<sup>78</sup> The early postwar women's movement symbolized a dedication to peace that spanned the later half of the 20th century, a torch transferred "from woman to woman" through recognition and protests.<sup>79</sup> These rights were made

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<sup>76</sup> "The Constitution of Japan," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet.

<sup>77</sup> Kurihara, "Japanese Woman Suffrage Movement," 86.

<sup>78</sup> Ronald P Loftus, *Changing Lives: The "Postwar" in Japanese Women's Autobiographies and Memoirs*. Ann Arbor, MI: Asia Past and Present, Published by the Association for Asian Studies, Inc., Asia Past and Present, 2013, 45.

<sup>79</sup> Loftus, *Changing Lives: The "Postwar,"* 62.

more complicated when women struggled to reconcile their duties as spouses and mothers with their new positions as working women. Additionally, In spite of the updated Civil Code, legislation concerning family and nationality retain remnants of the patriarchal family structure with all persons "registered under the koseki (household registration) system."<sup>80</sup> In this system, each home has a family head, who is generally a man and according to this arrangement, both marriage partners are supposed to have the same family name, which is generally the husband's.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Act was a legislation that used Article 14 to make it illegal to discriminate against a person's race, color, religion, sex.<sup>81</sup> Despite that, for women who were part of the workforce, there was a constant push, "within the office to encourage them to get married and leave their positions in order to focus on children."<sup>82</sup> Women are frequently encouraged to date and eventually marry a young Salary Man. Women who continue on after getting married are expected to depart the firm after they have their first kid. Women are generally discouraged from reentering the workplace after giving birth, and often do not try to return until their children have reached the age of majority. Another issue that Japanese women confront is that their marital tax regulations are out of date, discouraging them from advancing in their careers while married.<sup>83</sup> Since the 1960s, these rules have rewarded women who work part-time and for low pay, devaluing their labor and putting a greater emphasis on reproduction, "The maximum income one spouse can receive in order for the household to receive the exemption in the Japanese income tax is 1.03 Million yen, or about \$10,000 US dollars."<sup>84</sup> This salary

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<sup>80</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 130.

<sup>81</sup> Cummings, *Gender Equality in The Workplace*, 51.

<sup>82</sup> Cummings, *Gender Equality in The Workplace*, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Cummings, *Gender Equality in The Workplace*, 45.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

disparity originated in a society where males were the breadwinners of the home and women would stop working for reproductive reasons.

The postwar family structure is built upon egalitarian ideals, with marriage, divorce, and inheritance regulations based on equality between husband and wife, as well as equality among siblings.<sup>85</sup> After 1947, the Civil Code was updated to suit the standards indicated in the Constitution, with a special emphasis on the parts on relatives, marriage, and inheritance, which had generated controversy when the Meiji Civil Code was drafted. Divorce can be obtained nearly immediately by mutual permission of both partners under the new Civil Code, and the reasons for legal divorce are identical for husband and wife.<sup>86</sup> In terms of family law, women being allowed to obtain a divorce legally is a step toward equality, “The number of divorces in 1943 had been 49,705; in 1947 it was 79,551; and in 1950 it rose to 83,689...”<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, just because something is legal does not mean that it is accessible to everybody. Certain requirements must be met to get a divorce in Japanese and even if those requirements are met, “the Court may dismiss the action for divorce, if it deems the continuance of the marriage proper in view of all the circumstances.”<sup>88</sup> Divorce by mutual consent is very straightforward, but it may leave women without appropriate financial assistance. In a contentious divorce, the issue is significantly more complicated, with women who engage in the mediation process frequently advised to remain in the current marriage.<sup>89</sup>

These topics of having a choice in marriage and what suffrage meant at the time are prominent in *Tsuki wa noborinu* or *The Moon Has Risen*; a film produced by Nikkatsu Company

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<sup>85</sup> “The Constitution of Japan,” Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet.

<sup>86</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 130.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid 130.

<sup>88</sup> Marfording, “Gender Equality under Constitution,” 344.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 344.

and directed by Kinuyo Tanaka in 1955. She is remarkable because she is one of the first female directors in Japan. This film is about Mokichi, a widower, who shares his home with his three daughters. Chizuru, the eldest, has returned home following her husband's death; Ayako, who is of marriageable age but shows little desire in marriage; and Setsuko, the youngest and most tomboyish of the three sisters. Setsuko has a platonic relationship with Shoji, Chizuru's late husband's younger brother. When Setsuko learns that Shoji's old friend Amamiya remembers Ayako and that they were childhood friends, she joins forces with Shoji to bring the two together.<sup>90</sup> It's difficult to think of this film as having a feminist message when the whole plot of the film revolves around all of the three daughters happily married at the end of the film and their lack career and educational aspirations.<sup>91</sup>

Nonetheless, it can be seen as feminist in 1955 Japan by allowing the female characters to make their own choices and making the youngest of the lovers the matchmaker. The women had the option of selecting who they wanted to marry. Also, their father was quite indulgent with his three girls, allowing them to make their own decisions and not taking offense when two of his daughters ran away to marry.<sup>92</sup> During this time, girls were still freely sold off by their families.<sup>93</sup> Many bar girls or mistresses were trying to pay off family debts, and arranged marriages were still fairly frequent.<sup>94</sup> As for the lack of career aspirations, although many women were seeking higher education and some even got degrees, more often they did not, they would leave their career and degree behind to start a family.<sup>95</sup> However, the film embraces Article 24

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<sup>90</sup> *Tsuki wa noborinu*, 01:23:16.

<sup>91</sup> *Tsuki wa noborinu*, 01:41:00.

<sup>92</sup> *Tsuki wa noborinu*, 01:30:03.

<sup>93</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 130.

<sup>94</sup> Cummings, *Gender Equality in The Workplace*, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Cummings, *Gender Equality in The Workplace*, 16.

by allowing the women to choose their partner and promotes marrying for love instead of arranged ones. In this context, this film coincided with the Japanese feminist movement.

Additionally, Tanaka's choice in casting Mie Kitahara as the little pure and cheerful sister Setsuko is interesting when compared to the seductive type roles she usually plays.<sup>96</sup> A seductress is a woman who seduces someone and is portrayed in a negative light. A seductress is over sexualized, with vain and vapid characteristics, and also is a warning to men to stay away from this type of woman. This reinforces Tanaka's desire to portray women in a more wholesome light. All the women in the film are depicted as good people. However, it must be noted that this only extends to upper-class and middle-class women like the three daughters. Although it is for comedic purposes, the character of the maid, played by Tanaka herself, depicted her as a nervous and accident-prone. That is not bad in itself, but since the maid is the only female domestic servant given screen time in the film it does not shine a favorable light. This reflects a gap in the feminist movement of the 1950s, as the labor of many poor and working women was exploited.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

Through the consideration of Articles 14 and 24, this paper examined the gender differentiation of women in prewar Japan, as well as the transition towards a more democratic gender politics legislatively in postwar Japan. This paper explores how the western notion of gender equality harmed Japanese women's social and cultural advancement toward equality. Gender equality in any society is difficult to establish especially when systematic institutions such as the Japanese family system exist. Especially when such institution's strict gender roles and requirements of a family system undermine the concept of gender equality. Being influenced

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<sup>96</sup> “Tsuki Wa Noborinu / the Moon Has Risen (1955),” Cinema Talk, December 29, 2015, <https://cinematalk.wordpress.com/2015/12/28/tsuki-wa-noborinu-the-moon-has-risen-1955/>.

<sup>97</sup> Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 134.

by the Confusion patriarchal system, women were constantly lower in all relationship ordinance, be it in her submission to her father, husband, or son. Men and women cannot be considered as equals when women are constantly forced to submit or be obedient to the male figures in their life. Despite the advocacy of scholars such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, whose influential works inspired the Japanese feminist movement during the Meiji period, the pursuit of gender equality did not garner significant interest among women due to its direct opposition to the prevailing family system.

A system that has been in place for centuries cannot simply be removed with two Constitutional articles even if they grant women equality. This is the key flaw in the western diplomats and Beate Gordon's approach to expanding gender equality in Japan. Although the intention behind granting the gift of equality to Japanese women is commendable—particularly considering the greater rights afforded to them compared to the American Constitution—the effectiveness of Article 14 and 24 in fulfilling their intended purpose is compromised by the lack of consideration for potential social, cultural, and political pushback in a foreign nation. No real change can come in regards to gender equality without the dismantling of the family system but that is easier said than done. The family system is such an ingrained part of Japanese society and culture to the point that it even defines gender roles in society and at home.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the family system is responsible for changing the individual identity into a collective familial identity. Meaning that one's actions reflect upon the whole family.

Despite the family system becoming more tolerant post WWII, where it granted women a choice in who they could marry as marriages became less about political arrangements, it still enforced domesticity and gender roles upon women, with their sphere still being in the house.

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<sup>98</sup> Sekiguchi, "Patriarchal Family," 30.

Following the years after the war, the Japanese family system incorporated aspects of the American nuclear family system. The two-generation nuclear family, consisting of parents and their unmarried offspring, has become the popular paradigm of the contemporary family in Japan, much as it did in America decades ago.<sup>99</sup> That is not to say that households that contain grandparents/elders and extended family do not still exist. The key problem is not with the existence of family structures, but their enforcement of gender inequality through strict gender norms.

The implementation of foreign ideology upon Japan is another point of contention. As previously mentioned, the Japanese family system parallels the American nuclear family. Even without such intensive historical and cultural values surrounding it, American feminism had a difficult time breaking away from the heteronormative family system. This analogy is important as it highlights the importance of taking cultural and social institutions in foreign countries into account when creating policies. Additionally, the implantation of Confucianism in the 8th century in Japan parallels the new Constitution and highlights its weakness. The Japanese people first rejected Confucianism. Even though some accepted and studied it, Confucianism took centuries for its concepts to entwine themselves in the mainstream. This did not fully occur until the incorporation of Confucian principles in relation to bushido during the Tokugawa era. Similarly, the new conditions propose new ideas and notions that do not take Japanese values into account. As it stands, it could take decades or even centuries for gender equality to be fully implanted. Gender equality is not a new struggle and must be approached with great care when implanting it in any country, especially in a foreign one.

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**Case Study: Reflections on Encounters with Women on Missions Trips in Eastern Africa  
and Central Asia**

**by Reverend Susy Dand**

As a Christian teenager, I had always sensed that my vocation in life was to serve people on the margins of society, particularly ‘to love the unloved and look after the poor’. I will reflect on some encounters and the challenges of women I encountered, many of which, as a younger woman, I didn’t really understand. From my first mission trip in 2004, this brought me into contact with the challenges facing women in Thailand/Myanmar.

In February 2004, I visited Mae La, a Karen tribe refugee camp near Mae Sot, on the northern part of the Thai-Myanmar Border.

These were projects financially supported by a charity I was traveling with. Whilst there, I visited safe houses within the refugee camp where women were suffering from domestic abuse. I also visited the labour ward of a maternity unit located within bamboo-constructed buildings, which were raised off the ground by 12 stilts with no real door, but a cloth hung down over the doors. In the maternity unit I met teenage women who had delivered babies as a result of rape – rape being used as a weapon of war – and they had fled across the border for safety. The tiny baby and the teenager mother in the middle of a refugee camp have been stuck in my mind ever since, especially the vulnerability and the challenges they faced. I was 18 years old at the time myself, and I now wonder if the baby survived, and where his mother is now? Possibly still in a camp or relocated to a third country.

Upon my return, I volunteered and became a trustee of a charity called KarenAid, which aims to support refugees on both sides of the Thai-Myanmar border. I raised awareness of the challenges faced by the refugees. On a project review visit to a remote refugee camp, Mae La

Oon, I was registering and interviewing students in a sponsorship/education program. One young woman was unable to meet with me one day due to her menstrual cycle.

I continued participating in mission projects. In 2007 and 2008, I travelled to towns and villages in Uganda and Rwanda to speak at churches and conferences. I was the only woman traveling with two male colleagues. I stayed with a pastor's family, and during my stay, my menstrual cycle began, resulting in stained sheets. I had to seek advice from a male colleague about obtaining sanitary products. The pastor's sister was very kind and helpful, but another brother inquired about the situation when passing the soiled sheets and some money to obtain provisions. For the remainder of the day, I was conscious that the other men were aware of the incident, and I was asked if I was feeling better, which implied something was wrong. I have observed similar stigmas around menstrual cycles in both African and Asian countries.

Several years later, the reality of these challenges hit me. In 2013, I travelled to Tanzania to help register children and young people for a sponsorship programme through a charity called Grassroots, which worked through local churches to serve the poor and malnourished. In Tanzania, like in Malawi, education is free, but what often stops women from engaging in education is being able to afford uniforms, books, pens, and basic health care. Through the leader of the project, I also learned that a lack of sanitary wear would block women from engaging in education, and so they were developing a project to teach women to make their own washable sanitary towels. To take down one more barrier to women receiving an education.

In the UK in 2019, the government began providing sanitary products to address 'Period Poverty' as a barrier to education. However, it wasn't until 2021 that the 'tampon tax' was abolished.<sup>100</sup> In 2023, 21% of women in the UK reported being unable to afford sanitary

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<sup>100</sup> Period poverty: Free sanitary products for schools is 'huge step' - BBC News Accessed 25/05/25

products. This issue persists even in Western countries and is more pronounced in non-Western regions with lower access to sanitation. The lack of sanitary products can pose risks to health and well-being.<sup>101</sup>

During my travels to various African and Asian countries, I observed the challenges women often encounter. Numerous aid organizations, such as Plan, World Vision, and Grassroots, run projects to provide women with education and access to better sanitation, including how to make washable products. On a forthcoming trip to Malawi, where I will be visiting secondary schools and a women's project, I have encouraged my church community to donate washable sanitary products to help reduce these barriers.

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<sup>101</sup> The global state of period poverty | World Vision UK Accessed 25/5/25

## **Assyrian Women's Role in Community Building**

**by Sarah Gawo**

### **Introduction**

The Assyrians are a Semitic people native to Mesopotamia, which includes parts of modern Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Despite their undeniable link to these lands, Assyrians have faced waves of displacement due to political tension and religious persecution. In the mid-20th century, following and before the Second World War, many Assyrians migrated from rural areas to major cities like Baghdad for better opportunities and stability within their homeland. For the purpose of this essay, I want to explore the roles Assyrian women have played in activism, education, household management, and community development during the latter half of the 20th century. Additionally, I will employ my mother's experience growing up in Baghdad, Iraq, as a case study to demonstrate the resilience of Assyrian women. I hope this paper promotes Assyrian women's strength and encourages more scholarship to be dedicated to them.

I want to acknowledge my father, Dr. Yacob Gawo, for instilling a love of history in me and, of course, for helping me better understand the Assyrian landscape of Iraq during the latter half of the 20th century and helping me fill the gaps in my research. I would also like to thank my mother, Maureen Gawo, for being vulnerable with me, sharing her story of living in Iraq, and for her enduring resilience. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the Ashurbanipal Library of the Assyrian Cultural Foundation for carrying diverse collections and preserving the voices of Assyrians worldwide. It has made the research process very convenient, and I am so grateful for it.

### **Assyrians, Political Movements, and the Rise of the Ba'athists**

It is necessary to start this by providing some context about the regimes present in Iraq during this time. In 1958, Abdul-Karim Qasim led the July 14 Revolution, ending the Iraqi monarchy and a movement towards a non-aligned and nationalist Iraq. Qasim's rule was puzzling for the Assyrians, and it is hard to say how the Assyrians were treated based on his policies. However, Qasim's desire to unite various groups within Iraq and promote them as Iraqi, instead of united Arabs, allowed the Assyrians to live more comfortably in Iraq (Naoum, 27-28).

Although this does point to Qasim's tolerance of minorities and excluded groups of Iraqi society, there are reports about his complicated relationship with the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). Though the ICP had a complicated relationship with the new regime, it embraced specific values that resonated with many Assyrians of the time and earlier. Communism and leftist ideas naturally attracted marginalized communities since they emphasized class struggles and labor issues. Assyrians did not align with Iraq's religious or national dogma. The ICP's secular policies and nonsectarian principles were undoubtedly an appealing option (Benjamen, 28)

The League for the Defense of Women's Rights and other organizations shaped the public face of communism after Qasim's rise. The League for the Defense of Women's Rights promoted gender equality while rallying support for the new republic (Pursley, 159). However, after Qasim's regime was overthrown in 1963, the Ba'athists who seized power specifically targeted these groups whom they accused of communist ties.

Benjamen suggests that some Assyrian women played an active role in Iraq's political and social movements, such as the left-leaning organizations like the League for the Defense of Women's Rights. Organizations such as these gave Assyrian women a space to contribute meaningfully within their society. Instead of acting as passive supporters, Assyrian women were able to become forces of change. However, these affiliations also carried significant risk,

particularly after Qasim's overthrow and the rise of the Ba'athist regime (which I mentioned earlier). The new regime ultimately suppressed these organizations, and women were left vulnerable to persecution (Benamen, 29).

The Ba'athists had initiated their reign of terror through torturous methods, where women were beaten and violated. One eyewitness explained that many victims who they believed to be communists or communist sympathizers were crammed into very small rooms and were deprived of food and water for several days. They had even poured sewer water onto the victim's wound, which resulted in painful infections. The witness goes on to explain that some women were hung upside down from ceiling fans, while others were burned with hot metal objects or had their bones shattered by iron bars. Ultimately, the brutal and oppressive nature of the new Ba'athist regime suggests that this regime had prioritized using violence and cruelty as a tool to maintain power in Iraq (Ismael, 107-108). Unfortunately, Assyrian women who were part of these left-leaning organizations would be targeted, and it left the efforts of groups like the ICP weakened.

### **Assyrian Women's Roles and Social Expectations**

Assyrian women in the 20th century explored a patriarchal social structure that influenced their roles and responsibilities within the community. Assyrian men predominantly held authority in the public sphere while Assyrian women played a crucial role in the private sphere. They were in charge of managing household affairs, raising their children, and preserving cultural traditions. Although societal expectations constrained them, women found ways to exercise influence within their communities by enrolling in higher education, entering the workforce, and, in some cases, participating in the political sphere (aforementioned), particularly in the latter half of the 20th century.

Before continuing the conversation about Assyrian women and their roles within this transformative period in Iraqi history, it is important to note that scholarship concerning Assyrian women is scarce and overlooked in modern Assyrian history. Dr. Alda Benjamen, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Dayton, does an outstanding job describing and analyzing the efforts of Assyrian women in the 20th century. Her book, *Assyrians in Modern Iraq: Negotiating Political and Cultural Space*, is an excellent study for anyone interested in modern Assyrian history. Her work provides excellent examples of Assyrian women's engagement in activism, education, and community development throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Considering the rarity of research on this topic, Benjamen's work is a great resource for understanding the voices of Assyrian women in Iraqi society. Accordingly, much of my analysis will draw upon her scholarship, as it offers amazing insights about the strength and determination of Assyrian women.

Benjamen draws on a few examples from the bilingual (Assyrian/Arabic) magazine “Mordinna Atouraya” (The Assyrian Intellectual) published by the Assyrian Cultural Club throughout the 70s. These examples demonstrate the diverse roles and societal expectations placed on Assyrian women. A perfect example of the traditional role of Assyrian women in household management and motherwork is illustrated in Bet Benyamin d’Ashitha’s article, published in the magazine in 1975. The article is titled “Modi-ila Yimma?” (What is a Mother?). In essence, this article touches on the role of the Assyrian mother. The mother is depicted as a nurturing force who takes pride in taking care of her children and acts as a caretaker of her community. He describes that the mother is responsible for taking away the suffering from her children, so that she may not see her children in pain. Moreover, d’Ashitha describes the mother as responsible for instilling good character in her children. She must teach them good values like

loving their nation and their church. It concludes by describing that the mother is solely responsible for making the child good or bad. If the mother raises her child to be a good person, she knows her value and has done well for the community (Benamen, 151; d'Asthitha, 11).

Bet Benyamin d'Ashitha's article offers a deep insight into the cultural and social expectations placed on Assyrian women about motherhood and examines the significant role they played in nurturing, teaching, and instilling moral values in the next generation of Assyrians. It is interesting to show that the responsibilities of motherhood in Assyrian society extend beyond homelife to embrace a duty to the nation and the church. It emphasizes just how interconnected the family, culture, and identity are. This article is not just praise for mothers, but we can also see a structured expectation placed on women, especially mothers, to carry the emotional, moral, and even national weight of future generations.

However, Benamen further explores the nuances in the roles of Assyrian women by providing yet another example drawn from the same Assyrian magazine. This time, the article "Fatat Jami'iyya" (A University Girl), published in 1973, written by Koriyal Shamon in Arabic, tells the short story of a young Assyrian woman named Evelyn grappling with societal expectations. The story begins with her worried about a secret she had kept since she felt it could damage her societal status. She worries about how to face not only her mother and father, but her colleagues as well, and ultimately loses herself in very dark thoughts. Benamen notes that the author implies that her shame stems from something honor-related. However, Evelyn woke up from this nightmare and learned she had passed her university exams (Benamen, 150-151; Shamon, 33-34).

I enjoyed this piece because it demonstrates how women were expected to maintain traditionalism but were also required to embrace modernity. As Benamen puts it, "the author of

this story seemed to suggest that education and success were as important as traditional societal expectations of women" (151). I believe this story is a commentary on the transformative identity of Assyrian women in the 20th century and how they were expected to handle both of these pressures (even today). We know that traditional values and roles of Assyrian women play a big part in Assyrian society, but this piece offers a more nuanced element. This element challenges the idea that Assyrian women were meant to exist within the confines of the private sphere and traditional social expectations/roles. The story of Evelyn encourages Assyrian women to occupy spaces beyond the home. The weight of the university exams is demonstrated by Evelyn's anxiety, making higher education just as valued as the traditional markers of honor and femininity. "A University Girl" allows readers to reinterpret what it means to be an Assyrian woman in a transformative period.

### **Case Study**

I want to examine a few of my mother's experiences in Iraq. My mother, Maureen, was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1958 to Shmuel and Nanajan Yalda. However, her ancestry came from Iran, which had already put my mother at a disadvantage when seeking higher education. When her grandfather, Michael (Meesho), migrated to Iraq from Iran, he never applied for Iraqi citizenship. Not that it would have made much of a difference since citizenship was never guaranteed for people like my mom. Being an outsider was like a stain you could not remove; it carried on from generation to generation.

According to my mother, acceptance in elementary school, middle school, and high school was a headache for Assyrians who carried Iranian blood. Every year, initially, Maureen had to renew her legal residency status to remain in school. Later, she would have to renew her papers every six months by the late 1970s.

When Maureen finally finished high school, she dreamed of entering university, so she began applying to several schools in Iraq. Months went by, and she did not hear back from any universities, which caused her to worry about her future. She and her mother, Nanajan, went to the consulate office under the Iranian embassy, where they spoke to a representative of the Iranian education board. The representative listened to Nanajan patiently before delivering a crushing blow. “I am so sorry to say this, but take your daughter home and see if she can find work.” He told Nanajan, “If you hope to get her into university, it is impossible.” Nanajan was eager for an explanation. “There are only 13 spots for those who carry Iranian blood,” he explained, “and those are reserved for the children of diplomats.”

After that meeting, my mother felt hopeless and saw her dreams of going to university shattered. She recalls watching her neighbors begin dressing in university clothing and how it made her feel so sad since it was a privilege she could never have in her home country. However, she refused to give up. If she could not study, she would work.

In 1978, her first job was as an executive secretary, translator, and public notary. She could not apply for government jobs that offered pensions and benefits. Her Iranian status made that impossible. Instead, she entered the private sector and worked for a foreign company. A family friend named Donna took Maureen under her wing and trained her to be a working woman. After 3-4 months of shadowing Donna, my mother was offered a position at a Swiss-owned company, Itten & Brechbull, with a contract with Iraq’s Ministry of Defense. The company was working on a project to build a naval hospital in Basra, Iraq, and my mother became responsible for translating and notarizing highly sensitive documents at 18 years old. She recalls all the sleepless nights when she worried if the legal documents were translated correctly

and signed. Unfortunately, her boss was then accused of being an Israeli spy, which led to the company's closure.

Maureen, however, found work again. This time, she was working with a German-American company. The Iraqi government contracted Germans to build a petrochemical Project in Basra, Iraq. The Germans, in turn, subtracted American workers. The company was called Lummes & Thyssen and had Americans to track the project's progress. Nevertheless, again, Maureen managed paperwork and handled all the passports and visas for American engineers and builders, while juggling between official correspondence in both English and Arabic.

Then, the day came when our family was marked for deportation since the tensions between Iraq and Iran were heating up in April 1980. In a desperate attempt to save their home, Nanajan transferred the house title to Shamiran, Maureen's aunt and Nanajan's sister. Shamiran was the only member of our family who had obtained Iraqi citizenship. To no avail, the Iraqi government did not even consider Shamiran's citizenship and instead detained her and the rest of the family and took them to the office of the Iraqi Security Forces.

At this time, my mother handled all the communications after they had been deported to Iran. She felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility for herself and her mother, father, grandmother, and grandfather. In doing so, my mother took on a leadership role for her family, while also experiencing immense emotional labor that women are often expected to provide. My mother's determination to navigate difficult situations for the sake of herself and her family speaks to the resilience and the duties women must carry, which often go unnoticed. This story does not just showcase her personal strength but also reflects the enduring strength that countless Assyrian women display daily. They often bear the emotional and logistical burdens for their families. Assyrian women are expected to maintain cultural traditions and values, take care of

their families, and all while managing their own hardships. Overall, these experiences emphasize women's foundational role in community life and their ability to bounce back from very difficult situations, which is true for women worldwide. My mother's story is just one example of how Assyrian women adapted under challenging situations and persisted against all odds. There are so many details I wish that I could include in this narrative. Perhaps, I will revisit this essay one day and detail the hardships my mother and her family went through to reach the United States.

## **Conclusion**

Although often overlooked throughout history, Assyrian women contained qualities such as resilience, determination, and strength despite the many forces that hindered their progress. Some Assyrian women entered the political sphere as activists and fought for gender equality even when it carried such a significant risk. They also sought higher education and developed their communities by raising a new generation of Assyrians to love their nation. Assyrian women also opened their homes to their communities, promoting support and solidarity. Not only were the homes important for upholding the community's traditions, but they also allowed intergenerational knowledge to be dispersed. In my mother's case, it was interesting for me, in particular, to see how she navigated through all the trials and tribulations of living in Iraq. Social expectations undoubtedly shaped her dreams of attending university, but she found a way to succeed by entering the workforce and caring for her family. All these stories of endurance and the commitment to upholding family and cultural values reflect a powerful narrative of Assyrian women's role in building their community and shaping its future.

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## Current Issues

**Introduction:** What issues are women facing today in non-Western areas? When did women get suffrage in areas where we have studied? What health issues do women face? Here are a few sources to review.

- **Watch:** [Timeline: Women's Suffrage Worldwide](#)
- **Watch:** [Period Poverty from www.blossomflow.org](#) (young women miss school because they cannot afford or get access to menstrual items during their period)
- **Watch:** [Even today, over 30% of young women lack access to hygienic menstrual products due to myths and lack of education. This Menstrual Hygiene Day, let's break the taboos \(28 May every year\)](#)
- **Watch:** [United Nations Human Rights Council: Natalia Kanem, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund \(UNFPA\), gave an opening statement at Human Rights Council panel discussion on menstrual hygiene management, human rights, and gender equality.](#)
- **Read:** [World Health Organization: Articles and the latest news on Women's Health on a Global Scale](#)
- **Watch:** [Global Campaign Gives Impetus to Women's Land Rights in Africa](#)
- **Watch:** [These Nepalese Nuns Are Literally Fighting For Gender Equality, And What They Do Is ...](#)

## Conclusion

What have we learned about women in non-Western civilizations? Women's history in a global context shows that women wielded power, were essential for communal survival, and played key roles in various areas, including trade and political activity. Their experiences range

from economic influence and community involvement to overcoming obstacles and serving valiantly during wars and crises. Understanding these roles and histories is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of women's stories within non-Western contexts, and it is this knowledge that helps to break down stereotypes and amplifies the voices of all women beyond a Western-centric historical analysis.

How can you continue to amplify these women's stories and the events you have learned about in this workbook?

## Biographies of Contributors for Unit Five

**Dr. Rabia Ali** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the International Islamic University, Islamabad. She is the recipient of the Australian Award for her Ph.D. from the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, and the recipient of the Fulbright Award for Fellowship at Brown University in 2019 and Harper College in 2023. She specializes in the Sociology of Gender, and some of her research interests include gender justice, women's empowerment, higher education, women's leadership, and women's reproductive health.

**Reverend Susy Dand** is Associate Vicar at St. Mary's Hanwell in London, an Anglican Church that has operated since 950 CE. Alongside her role at St Mary's, Susy is the chaplain to Bishop Ramsey Secondary School in Ruislip, an area in the London Borough of Hillingdon, west London. Her humanitarian and missionary work has brought her to several African and Asian countries.

**Sarah Gawo**, an Oakton alum, earned her Master's degree in Library and Information Science at Dominican University and is currently pursuing a Master's in Public History at Loyola University. She is the library coordinator at the Ashurbanipal Library of the Assyrian Cultural Foundation. Her writing appears in Wendy Adele-Marie's multiple editions of *A History of the Holocaust: A Guide for the Community College Student*.

An Oakton alum, **Ellie Pearlman** is a graduate of Gratz College, where she earned her Master's degree in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. She also holds a B.A. in Women and Gender Studies from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and an A.A. in Education from Oakton College. Her academic work explores themes of gender, memory, and power in Holocaust history, with particular focus on women in Nazi Germany, the evolution of

antisemitism, and the epigenetic impacts of genocide and trauma. She has contributed extensively to Holocaust and women's history educational resources, including textbook chapters on medical experimentation in Nazi Germany, female SS guards, and gendered violence during wartime. Her writing appears in Wendy Adele-Marie's OERs, *Women in Western Civilization: The Workbook*, *Women in Non-Western Civilization: The Workbook*, and multiple editions of *A History of the Holocaust: A Guide for the Community College Student*. In addition to her scholarship, she has served as an editorial assistant and index contributor for several of these volumes. Pearlman's work reflects a strong commitment to trauma-informed education, public history, and preserving survivor narratives across generations.

An Oakton alum, **Rija Qureshi**, is pursuing a Master's in History from DePaul University, with a special focus on women's history, gender studies, and feminism.

## Author and Editor of the Workbook

Wendy Adele-Marie, Ph.D., is a Distinguished Professor of History at Oakton College and Coordinator of their Jewish Studies concentration. Adele-Marie's research interests center on Nazism and include topics such as war and gender, genocide, the analysis of Nazi constructs of images of women, and the sociological and psychological factors that led to women perpetrating the Holocaust. She also studies the Second World War, representations of Americans in 20th-century popular culture, social reforms, the progressive movement, women's leadership and representation in early modern Europe, and non-Western history. A Woman of Influence Award recipient from Roosevelt University, Adele-Marie was also a Fellow for Northwestern University's Annual Summer Institute on the Holocaust and, in 2020, published the chapter "Aryan Femininity: Identity in the Third Reich" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture*. Author of the book *Women as Nazis: Female Perpetrators of the Holocaust*, Adele-Marie has written eighteen book reviews, twenty-two essays, and articles (including an essay on Adolf Hitler for *The Encyclopedia of World War II*) and two instructional textbook modules for Roosevelt University, titled *Images of Women* and then *Women and Work*. A course designer, she has conceived, designed, and developed multiple courses for Oakton College, including main shells for online use. Adele-Marie was also the editor of the series *Annual Editions: United States History, Volume 1: Colonial Through Reconstruction*, and *Annual Editions: United States History, Volume II: Reconstruction Through Present*.

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